

A Gendered Bystander Effect: Experimental Evidence on the Vulnerability to International Human Trafficking of Wo(Men) in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT Which gender is more vulnerable to human trafficking recruitment, and does a bystander from the community reduce situational vulnerability? Moving away from the passive victim framework, we hypothesise that vulnerability to an exploitative overseas job-offer can be rational, vary by gender, and be moderated by the situational social influence of another person. Building on rational choice and the literature on irregular labour migration, we conducted a lab-in-the-field experiment in a medium-sized city in Tanzania. Our analyses show no evidence of differential vulnerability by gender per se, but a gendered bystander effect. The influence of an additional person from the community in the setting, appears to reproduce gendered social norms that push men towards risk-taking and hence vulnerability. Another finding that seems counter-intuitive at first is that people who struggle to meet their most basic needs are less vulnerable. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of gendered vulnerability, with important implications for the necessity of gender sensitivity in international human trafficking prevention activities. They challenge the conventional wisdom that female vulnerability is the prime issue prevention strategies would need to tackle, emphasising male vulnerability, the role of targeting based on sex, and the potential of prevention-strategies at the community level.

KEYWORDS: Human trafficking; labour migration; gender inequality; vulnerability; lab-in-the-field experiment; East Africa

1. Introduction

In the context of irregular migration border-crossing, the phenomenon of international human trafficking is characterised by at least one form of exploitation. In contrast to the one-sided media-framing of violent kidnapping in human trafficking recruitment situations, exploitation as forms of fraud, deception, or other types of power abuse are much more common (Bonilla and Mo 2019; Cockbain et al., 2018; Deshingkar 2019). However, it is difficult to determine the

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exact point at which something ‘counts’ as trafficking (Smith-Cannoy et al., 2022; Swenstein and Mogulescu, 2016). Fraud, deception and abuse of power often only become apparent at a relatively late stage in the recruitment process.

One common method of recruiting people for international human trafficking is through dubious offers of international labour migration (Nampewo 2021; Okonofua et al., 2004; Sobieszczyk 2000). In these cases, the literature generally identifies the combination of an economic opportunity and a migration component offered by one hand as an indicator of a probably exploitative offer (Platt et al., 2018, Davidson 2013; Kara 2012). After an initial investment, this is linked to a form of loan and, later, dependency through debt and liabilities. However, it is still difficult to distinguish this situation from a decent job offer abroad. In this study we are interested in this liminal stage.

In general, international human trafficking is seen as a highly gendered topic, placing women in the victim role (Hebert, 2016; Walby et al., 2016). This is supported by the large qualitative research evidence, showing case-evidence on an individual level (for a review i.a. Russell, 2018). The same holds for interpretations from quantitative data (for a review i.a. Gozdziaik & Collett, 2005). Due to the fact that the quantitative evidence is based on data of detected incidents or prosecuted cases of trafficking, not only undetected incidents but also attempts to commit trafficking are not taken into account (Bales, 2003; Laczko, 2005). It is hard to derive an informative regional or demographic trend from this data, particularly in areas with noteworthy corruption, as detection is systematically linked to strategic search activities (Rothstein and Varraich, 2017). But more than this, the focus on occurrence (i.e. detection) hinders larger anti-human trafficking efforts as it intertwines the outcomes of potentially unequal targeting by sex and gendered vulnerability – a pivotal difference for prevention activities (Swenstein and Mogulescu, 2016). In this study we focus on the latter, the gendered¹ vulnerability to dubious labour offers that may lead to trafficking.

We investigate which gender group is more vulnerable to a situation of potential human trafficking recruitment, i.e. the liminal stage of a potentially exploitative international labour offer. Vulnerability is to be understood as the likelihood that a targeted person will agree to the dubious offer that is made. More precisely, we are asking: What role does gender and social gender norms play in vulnerabilities? In addition to the targets’ gender, our research also examines one additional situational deterrent to trafficking: the presence of an additional person from the community as a bystander. How does a bystander, i.e. a situational social influence, shape the gendered vulnerability? This form of deterrence is a particularly important one in countries in which the law may not necessarily act as a deterrent. Yet, it remains an understudied determinant.

In most accounts of victimological frameworks, the victims of human trafficking are denied agency and even infantilised, often being categorised together with children (Bastia, 2006; Langhorn, 2021; Vullnetari, 2012). Incidents are often communicated as determined by demographic characteristics, and therefore appear to be either the fault of the victims - because of sex, gender, age or other characteristics of appearance - or unpreventable. A perspective like this may result in the implementation of human trafficking prevention activities that are based on biased assumptions, which subsequently may give rise to unanticipated consequences of aid programmes (i.a., Zveglic & Rodgers, 2003).

In line with newer perspectives in the literature, in this article, we adopt a perspective of voice and agency of targeted persons (Bogatzki and Meierrieks, 2024; Deshingkar 2019; Paret and Gleeson 2016; Stoklosa and Ash 2021) and therefore draw on rational choice theory (Gammage et al., 2016). Assigning agency to potential future victims does not mean that they are to blame². It allows to find patterns that make vulnerability in situations of potential trafficking recruitment more likely and dive deeper in the female-victim picture that blurs the lines between female vulnerability due to individual choices, versus vulnerability because of a more frequent targeting of women. Our quantitative approach aims to back up the current

qualitative evidence in this vein, as quantitative approaches are still rare. This may facilitate a more effective prevention activity dissemination and contribute to the destigmatisation of victims of trafficking (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

In addition to rationalising potential vulnerability, the second contribution of our theoretical perspective is that - rational - vulnerability can be a result of the interaction between the structural setting of a situation and individual agency within that setting. The dilemma between the two is a re-occurring topic in the rational choice literature (Gautschi & Wolbring, 2022) as well as in the migration literature (Bakewell, 2010). It provides insights into when a structural setting makes an individual's decision rational or not. We add the structural situation setting in two ways. First, in form of a second person, the offeror, and the anticipation of their reaction to a decision, to learn how it interacts with the individual's agency. Second, we add a situational context component in the form of a bystander from the community. The literature on gender-based violence (GBV) demonstrates that bystanders are often the first to witness signs of abuse. Empowering them to recognise, intervene in, or report abuse can substantially strengthen prevention and protection systems (Coker et al., 2011). On the relative importance of demographics moderated by a change in the setting evidence remains limited (Schwarz et al., 2019).

Our rational choice theoretical framework builds on two central sociological constructs known to play a critical role in decision making: social norms and social influence. In patriarchal settings, social norms are highly gendered, with more locally bound, conservative attitudes for women (Ahmed and Sen 2018). At the same time, the situational consequences of refusing an offer would be higher for women than for men. This leads us to form two contrasting hypotheses in opposite directions for each gender with respect to their vulnerability. Regardless of the mechanism path, we expect the bystander's influence on the situation to reduce vulnerability for women and, depending on the mechanism path, to increase (mechanism path: social norms) or stagnate (mechanism path: situational vulnerability) for men.

We implement a lab-in-the-field experimental design in a medium-sized city in Tanzania with rural and urban regions. As in other regions of Africa, with increasing prosperity and the advent of tourism, the Arusha region in Tanzania is experiencing an increase in the crime of human trafficking, both domestically and internationally (Magesa, 2023; UNODC, 2024). The sample was selected in an arbitrary manner from a pool of potential participants in areas of central importance to the local community, including the market, religious institutions (church and mosque), and educational establishments. Despite having a convenience sample, the data resemble a wide range around the median Arusha citizen³, with a distribution slightly skewed towards the younger and less wealthy population. In the experimental design set up, we ask respondents to evaluate hypothetical vignette scenarios that randomly vary the demographic characteristics of gender, age and the presence of a community member as a bystander. The study received ethical approval from the institutional review board of the university of the authors prior to implementation.

The results reveal no evidence of differential vulnerability by gender per sé. However, the situational influence of an additional person appears to moderate the effect of the potential victim's gender. Our analyses indicate that the social influence effect reproduces gendered social norms, which means that men are being pushed to accept the dubious work offer. Our results do not indicate that women are protected by the community. Several robustness checks support this finding. Most importantly, we show that this gendered effect is specific to the situation of an exploitative job offer and not to general (non-dubious) job offers in the same setting. The scenarios were judged to be realistic as respondents reported that they would expect a job offer to be made in a situation such as the one described.

The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of gendered vulnerability, and the important role played by bystanders. In short, we intertwine the rationality of individual vulnerability to labour exploitation with the effects of social influence. This has implications for the often-neglected role of the community in demonstrating its high impact on gender inequalities in

efforts to prevent exploitative labour migration, re-iterating the need for a more gender-sensitive prevention activity (i.a., see Duong, 2012). In light of our findings, the term ‘gender sensitive’ does not imply a focus on women due to the higher prevalence of female victims of trafficking compared to male victims. Rather, it entails the implementation of prevention activities that are gender specific in terms of vulnerability-reducing initiatives, encompassing education at the individual level and the identification of gender imbalances in prevention activities at the community level to incorporate potential bystander-actionability (Schwarz et al., 2019; Latané and Darley, 1969).

However, if we would infer gender from sex to get an indication on the general gender distribution in detected incidents of trafficking and combine this with our findings of gendered situational vulnerability and a male-dominated community bystander effect, it becomes evident that the targeting of victims of trafficking is even more gender imbalanced than previously assumed. Consequently, our results emphasise the necessity of focusing on potential victims and potential perpetrators equally in order to achieve the objective of reducing criminal activities such as human trafficking.

2. Theory

Our theoretical framework follows the logic of a rational choice game. The theoretical model is based on a common setting for the recruitment situation of human trafficking and includes on the one hand (i) the demographic characteristics of age and gender; where age shall act as a baseline comparison given its established effect in the literature (de Haas et al., 2019). In addition, we include (ii) the assumptions of situational rational choice, incorporating the following: (a) the anticipation of situational consequences by the other party in the game setting, and, (b) expected variations in the rational choice of the situation based on the interaction with the setting. Specifically, this includes the potential influence of a community member in the role of a bystander.

We focus on a particular case of the initiation of international trafficking via dubious international labour offers. A concentration on a singular form, of course, represents a simplified picture, but provides a methodology for navigating a complex process. International labour offers have been described as common to different types of exploitation (Kara, 2012) and is found in multiple case studies of international human trafficking (Nampewo 2021; Okonofua et al., 2004; Sobieszczyk 2000). In our rational choice scenario, the potential victim is in a situation in which they must decide whether or not to accept a dubious job offer abroad by the offering party (hereafter the offeror). As the individual is not necessarily victimised at this stage, we use the term target. In line with our agency approach, and empirical evidence from the literature on irregular migration and labour migration we also assume that the individual is aware that the decision they are about to make is a risky one (Alpes 2016; Okonofua et al., 2004). Recent literature around risk information shows with different samples from the African population (i.e. each only representative for a certain area, or non-representative) that in general Africans are aware that labour migration is a risky decision, but the level of knowledge and the way they perceive those risks may vary (e.g. Beber and Scacco 2022, Morgenstern 2024, Tjaden 2023). Furthermore, there is a substantial body of literature on qualitative research, including works such as Bakewell and Sturridge (2021), Van Bommel (2020), and Belloni (2019). However, while a judgement as risk situation is assumed, it is not necessary that the target interprets this situation as human trafficking. As found in qualitative case studies this won’t be the case in most natural settings (i.a., Smith-Cannoy et al., 2022).

A decision that carries an element of risk may be made if the potential benefits outweigh the costs and risks involved. This is contingent upon the assumption that the utility of taking a dubious offer is greater than the current situation. The benefits of a questionable offer of labour migration are primarily monetary and come with the inherent uncertainty of actually realising

them. In contrast to economically stable Western societies, people in less stable economies may more often perceive risky offers as a viable option for providing for themselves and their families, rationally trading safety for resources (Sobieszczyk 2000; Stoklosa and Ash, 2021). The hope for a better economic situation is acting here as a rational choice given the current reference point (Adeyinka et al., 2023; Boerman & Golob, 2021; Okonofua et al., 2004). In other words, an exploitative job offer may be perceived as a rational choice, provided that the potential benefits remain significant, and the risk of situational decision making does not block the payoff. One variable that has been regularly proven in the literature to influence international labour migration decision making is age (de Haas et al., 2019; Russell, 2018). The longer the target expects to stay in a potential future job abroad, the higher the monetary outcome. The younger the individual, the longer the time horizon, and the higher the utility in the equation. From this rational choice derivation, it is only reasonable to expect that younger people would be more vulnerable to exploitative job offers than older people. This establishes the baseline for the study, given the unambiguous nature of the evidence on age in the literature.

With regard to gender, we expect a variation in the benefits of refraining from the job offer abroad. Based on gendered social norms women are less expected to migrate than men (Baudassé and Bazillier, 2014; Docquier et al., 2020). Women are expected by society to take care of the family, so having a job is less valued for a woman and even less so if that job opportunity is linked to international migration (i.a. Evans 2019; Ahmed and Sen 2018; Knight and Brinton 2017). Men are expected to provide for the family - the (future) wife and children, but also the extended family, as role models in more collectivist cultural settings tend to do (i.a. Ali, 2007; Hahn and Klute, 2007). Hence, based on gendered social norms the benefits of refraining from the offer are higher for women than for men, which enhances the overall utility of the status quo for women and therefore reduces the probability to accept the dubious job offer, while increasing it for men and ergo their probability. This is in line with the literature on gender and international labour migration that shows smaller aspirations among women than men (Helbling and Morgenstern, 2023; Ruysen and Salomone, 2018), especially when having conservative gender norm attitudes (Morgenstern & Vargas-Silva, 2025).

Hypothesis 1a – social norms: We expect a lower (higher) probability to accept the dubious job offer among women (men).

In adding the situation (ii), we add context to the decision making. First, we include the anticipation of situational consequences by the other party into the situational rational choice setting. In other words, one does not only expect it to be rational for a target to act or decide upon their individual preferences, but to already incorporate anticipated situative reactions to their choice, in their decision making (Popper, 1995 [1967]). The offeror, a second player in the game, is in the situation with their own expectations, preferences and interests. These are unknown but presumed by the approached target. As described above, potential victims of human trafficking are aware of the potential risks and dangers that they may be exposed to Stoklosa and Ash, (2021). Based on prior experience and common knowledge the target can imagine the offeror has an interest in the target agreeing to the dubious job offer, as this will result in some form of reward for them (Lindquist et al., 2012). Human trafficking offenders often function as low-level operatives within larger criminal networks, carrying out tasks assigned by higher-ranking members of organised crime or mafia-like structures. Although they appear to be the direct perpetrators, they typically follow orders and enforce control mechanisms devised by more powerful individuals who orchestrate and profit from the trafficking enterprise. Hence, a disagreement to the offer would result in an upsetting of the offeror and may elicit unknown impulsive power reactions (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Whether there will be a response is uncertain. There is also a great deal of variation between offerors, who are also under varying degrees of pressure or to a varying extend in precarious situations (Busza et al., 2023). However, this extra layer of risk that lies in the reaction of the

counterpart, has a gendered dimension as in case study evidence most offerors are described as young male that perceive themselves as more powerful to women or entrench patriarchal values (Awumbila et al., 2019; Carpinteri et al., 2018; Smith-Cannoy et al., 2022).

Here, the likelihood and magnitude for negative reactions from the offeror is expected to be significantly higher for female individuals than for males. The underlying reasoning is their perceived vulnerabilities, which are rooted in gender-based inequalities such as economic dependence, social marginalisation and limited access to legal protections. Therefore, we expect women to not only have higher benefits of refraining from the offer, but also that they face higher consequences if they do refrain. In other words, based on this equation the gendered vulnerability is crucially dependent on the magnitude of gendered social norms in contrast to expected consequences via the offeror party. Let us formulate this ambivalence by posing a contrasting hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1b – situational vulnerability: We expect a higher (lower) probability to accept the dubious job offer among women (men).

As a second situational component we include a parameter that, as we will argue below, may moderate the previous expectations: social influence. More precisely, we include social influence in the form of an additional person on the target's side, also known as 'the community', a 'bystander' or, more intentional, a potential 'guardian' (Cohen and Felson 1979). In order to avoid additional complexity and to allow for more general applicability, we do not assume any behaviour or reaction of this third party in the model. This is also the most common behaviour in real life. The literature shows that people are much more likely to be a non-active bystander than an active, capable guardian in settings of criminal activity (Guerra & Zhuravleva, 2021; Latané and Darley, 1969). Based on theoretical frameworks in the literature, social influence in the described setting may operate through two gendered mechanisms: a reminder of social norms, and a protector from the offeror's reaction. Each of the two mechanisms is related to the previous hypotheses: Social norms are the key concept from which we derived H1a and situational risk for the counterhypothesis H1b. However, in the moderating effect, both mechanisms are expected to operate in a similar direction but to different extents depending on gender.

First, social influence can act as a reminder of societal and family norms. The presence of a person from the community can remind individuals of what is expected of them (Abbink et al., 2018; Balasubramanian et al., 2024; Young 2015). As argued above, we assume that social norms are generally followed, but a reminder can bring them back to the fore and therefore increase the benefit of refraining for women and decreasing it for men, similar to a priming effect. Thus, a bystander effect via a norm-signalling mechanism is expected to increase the vulnerability of an exploitative labour decision for men and reduce it for women by changing the utility of the outcome.

Second, the mechanism of social influence could work by reducing the expected situational consequences of the offeror in the game setting. In this case, the bystander would not have a direct influence on the target, but an indirect one by reducing the influence of the offeror via the probability of consequences. As the reactions of the offeror were highly gendered in our theoretical elaboration, we also expect a highly gendered impact of the offeror's influence via this mechanism. More specifically, we expect that the presence of the bystander will only change the decision about the dubious job offer for women.

Summarising this theoretical elaboration of the situational setting, the two described bystander-effect mechanisms influence the decision making via two distinct components of the equation. The bystander-effect via social norms is expected to work via a change in the benefit of refraining from the offer, which is expected to increase for women in the presence of the bystander and to decrease for men (i.e. men have a higher benefit to not refrain as the social norm signal via the bystander dictates). In the bystander-effect via the situational consequences mechanism, the presence of the bystander reduces the probability of the situational consequences happening. The change will particularly affect the decision to refrain from the exploitative

labour offer for women. Thus, we expect to get an indication of the mechanism that is more likely to be dominant at work by focusing on the magnitude of the gender difference in a setting with a bystander compared to one without a bystander.

Hypothesis 2a – social norms: We expect a lower (higher) probability to accept the dubious job offer among women (men) in the presence of a bystander to the situation.

Hypothesis 2b – situational vulnerability: We expect a lower (the same) probability to accept the dubious job offer among women (men) in the presence of a bystander to the situation.

3. Research design

3.1. Case

The study is conducted in the rural and urban areas of the Arusha region, in Northern Tanzania, East Africa. Tanzania, like many African countries is going through a phase of demographic transition, marked by high population growth and a large share of youth unemployment (Buehren et al., 2024). Tanzania can be described as a country with a rather low GDP per Capita, high informal economy, extreme-poverty, and substantial inequalities in the population (De Weerd 2010; Torm 2023). At the same time Tanzania is a country with a high employment rate of women, particularly among unmarried women (Klasen et al., 2021), but most work is unpaid (Westeneng and d'Exelle 2015). The increased economic engagement by women has resulted in an additional burden, but has also, on occasion, led to greater autonomy within their households and the generally rather (pastoral) gender system (Smith 2015; Vyas et al., 2015). Badstue et al. (2021) additionally posit that while local discourse appears to espouse the tenet of gender equality, practice remains markedly disparate and stubbornly conservative.

While the government is making some efforts to combat human trafficking, such as investigating trafficking cases, convicting offenders, and identifying the victims, as well as providing more funds for anti-trafficking programs, they still fall short of being able to prevent human trafficking. Although quantitative measurements in terms of victim-statistics may not be satisfactory (e.g., increased number of identified victims may also be the result of better enforcement of anti-trafficking activities), they might give a glimpse of insight on the prevalence. In the reporting period for 2021, the number of identified victims rose by 12%, compared to the previous period and stagnated for the period of 2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2022, 2023).

3.2. Sample

We build on a convenience sample that consists of participants that volunteered to take part in a study in January 2023. To reach a wide variety of participants we travelled together with an Non-governmental organisation (NGO), in Arusha city and around the Arusha region and stopped at different arbitrary places, such as markets, schools, social groups, churches, in different wards (i.e. Kata, an administrative geographic sub-dividing structure of the country Tanzania) with varying level of urbanity (see Figure 1) to ask people that were around to participate in a 'short survey' (not indicating the topic). The collaborating NGO is known to empower women, children and the youth and supported the participants in reading and understanding the survey and, if necessary, in writing down the answers, as the literacy levels vary strongly. We do not expect that the NGO had an impact on the answering behaviour of the participants but it is possible that the name of the NGO and hence their known mission may have attracted a higher proportion of less wealthy participants (need for empowerment) or people that support empowerment.

The sample comprises $N = 385$ full cases (before data cleaning $N = 403$). Based on our power calculation to detect a minimal direct effect, we derived a sample size of $N = 200$. In the field, the stopping rule in participant recruitment was not based on this number of participants but

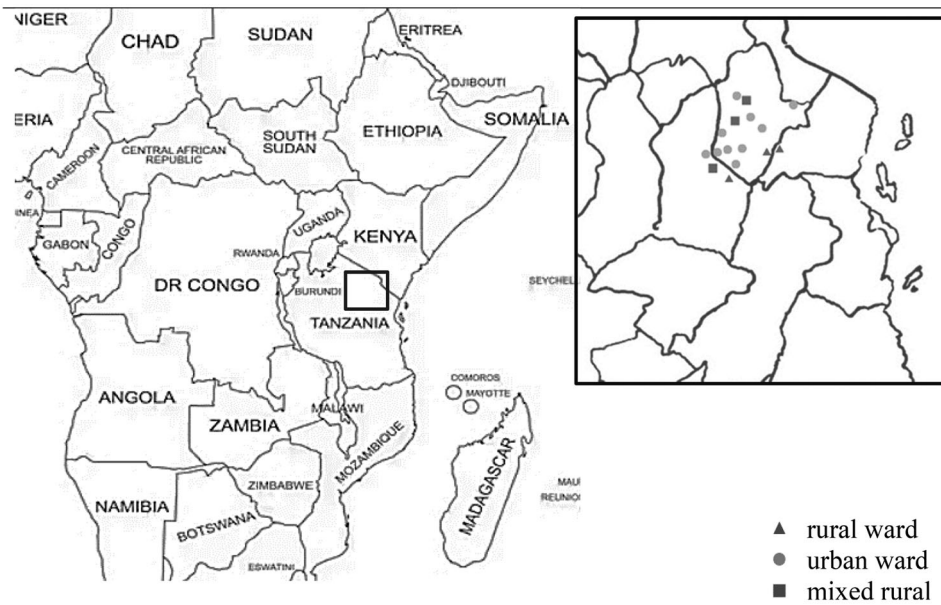


Figure 1. Maps. Left: Geographic location of Arusha region in Tanzania, East Africa. Right: Visualisation of arbitrary places where participants were recruited (e.g. markets, schools, social groups, churches), in different wards with varying level of urbanity.

on the number of planned field days (the number of field days was based on a conservative estimate of how many people per day were likely to participate). The sample is relatively balanced in terms of demographics, consisting of slightly more female individuals [43% male, 56% female], a high variation in age [range 14–80, median 24], the majority not married [58% not married, 42% married], living in a household with on average 5 people, having on average 1.9 children, and the slight majority having enough food for the household every day [44% poverty/not enough, 56% no poverty/enough]. However, we also see a relatively high unemployment level in our sample, with 63% indicating not having an official job.

Comparing our sample to the nationally representative Afrobarometer wave 9 data (Afrobarometer, 2022) suggests that our target sample was fairly similar to national patterns with respect to poverty levels, education and household size. In comparison to the Arusha sample in the Afrobarometer data the sample is slightly higher in poverty indication, slightly lower in positive employment indication (i.e. have work), and slightly more Muslim (in comparison to Christian). For a graphical visualisation of the data comparison see Appendix III. Nevertheless, given the clustered nature of the sampling strategy located within a limited number of provinces, we do not contend that the survey is representative at any administrative boundary level. Therefore, as we make causal claims that rely on the study having internal validity, as is the case for many experimental studies, we do not claim that the study is externally valid on a national level but rather characterises a relevant sub-group.

Seventy-six percent indicate that human trafficking is a problem in Arusha, the city under study. Knowledge questions show mixed results: A large group believes – falsely – that human trafficking can only be by force (32%) or that there is no difference between human trafficking and human smuggling (42%).

3.3. *Lab-in-the-field survey experimental design*

We categorise our experimental design as a lab-in-the-field design, since the study is conducted in the field, but via a paper and pencil survey (with in-person support in language and writing,

given the high number of illiterate people in the setting, particularly among less wealthy social groups) and hence the treatment manipulation does follow more of a lab design. Given the manipulation within the survey, we have high levels of control on the treatment assignment (Sniderman, 2018), and can ensure a treatment taking without any spill-over or non-compliance.

The treatment is implemented via short vignette stories with variations in attributes following the methodological approach of a factorial design. The vignette universe of our experimental design comprises 16 (2x2x2x2) vignettes. All vignettes have the same non-zero probability of being presented and no vignette sample was drawn as would have been the case with a d-efficient design where not all potential vignettes become part of the sample (Kleinewiese, 2022). The attributes consist of four dichotomous experimental variables: age [old, young], gender [male, female], bystander [yes present, no not present] and labour [exploitative, normal]. Each respondent is randomly assigned to 3 vignettes. Each assignment is independent of the other two assignments per person. Analytically, this means that the vignette evaluations (level 2) are nested in respondents (level 1). Due to the experimental design, the variables in the model are uncorrelated with unobserved characteristics for the level 1 variables by design. We report the outcomes of two analytical approaches: OLS regression results with robust clustered standard errors and multi-level models.

The study received Institutional review board (IRB) approval by the University of the authors prior to study implementation.

3.4. Treatment

The treatment text was available in English and Swahili, the local regional language. The majority, 88% of the participants, chose the Swahili version and only 12% the English version⁴. The wording of the treatment text in the English version of the questionnaire is as follows:

“Person B is walking down a road in their neighbourhood, on their way back from the marketplace. Person B is [age: 1. an old 2. a young] [gender: 1. woman; 2. man]. Person B is [bystander: 1. accompanied by their brother who is a particularly large and strong man; 2. alone]. They are approached by a man [labour: 1. who is known for being a wealthy local farmer who pays well for work; 2. who is known for offering people work abroad and then bringing them there]. The man stops to talk.”

In the treatment design we had a central focus on the setting being realistic and understandable for all respondents independent of socio-economic background or education level. To do so we had multiple iterations of feedback in the creation of the vignette with informants⁵ from the local community in Arusha. We are aware that the hypothetical situational setting described may seem unrealistic in a western context. In Tanzania, however, it is quite plausible and not per se dubious to receive a job offer from somebody of the broader community on the street. One of the most common walks, is for all gender and age-groups to the marketplace, as food is generally bought fresh. Concerning the bystander, it is most plausible to walk with family members as families are generally large and close. We decided for an ‘older brother’ due to the hierarchical structures in the Tanzanian culture, where the elders are more respected in general, and men are more respected concerning aspects of labour or finances. For an older sister we would presume similar effects based on the theory, but smaller in size.

Concerning the key indication of a dubious job offer - ‘who is known for offering people work abroad and then bringing them there’ -, we have deliberately avoided terms like ‘human trafficking’ or ‘exploitation’ to make the scenario more realistic and prevent social desirability effects. It is only through the combination of a job offer with an inclusive migration journey, which is offered by a single source, that it can be assumed that this is a dubious job offer. A job offer made on the street that does not involve migration would be perfectly normal. To control for this, we randomly included a variation in the type of job offer (i.e. the local farm job vs the

dubious job abroad) as a key robustness check. A migration journey without a job offer as an inducement would be a clear indication of people smuggling. These implicit indications are known by the local people- as our informants confirm – although not necessarily, with all the potential risky consequences these imply. One limitation that comes with this strong emphasis on a realistic treatment is that we work with a so-called bundle-treatment (see e.g. Lowe, 2025). Albeit we assume the effect of the bundle, it can be that for some individuals the distinct components of the treatment have an unequal impact. Dubious labour offers are, however, the most common starting points of human trafficking cases (Kara, 2012). It is not relevant for the research question whether participants are able to classify the scenario as a human trafficking scenario.

One first indication for plausibility and understanding drawn from the descriptive statistics is the relatively large amount of people who reported that they or friends and family members have been in a situation alike to the described ‘Person B’. Thirty percent have been in the situation of being recruited as a henchman or a potential victim or both, on a regular basis. Asked about family or friends, 55% reported that someone in their surrounding had experienced such a situation.

Outcome measurement. The outcome is measured with the hypothetical question, asking ‘If you were Person B, how likely is it that you would agree to a work-offer made by the man?’. The 11-point answer scale ranges from 0% ‘very unlikely’ to 100% ‘very likely’. Given the task-description of ‘if you were Person B’, we expect the participant to put themselves in the shoes of the described person in the described setting. A multitude of vignette studies and survey methodological testing supports the claim of this to be the case and, hence, allows for a hypothetical probability behavioural measurement (e.g., Auspurg and Hinz, 2014; Kleinewiese, 2021). An additional analysis supports the expectation for the present study (see appendix).

4. Results

4.1. Demographic characteristics

The age of the targeted individual, which had the intended effect of priming a longer time horizon after the decision for younger people and hence a higher benefit in contrast to the risk, can make younger people more vulnerable to making a decision in favour of the exploitative job offer. Figure 2 reveals that, on average, younger people are significantly more likely to take the exploitative job offer than older people. On a scale from 1 to 11, younger people are 2 points more likely to take the offer than older people. This evidence resonates with the wider literature and may act as a benchmark.

In regard to gender, we hypothesised a two-directional effect. Based on the literature on risk level and risk aversion or risk taking, we expected that women would be less vulnerable to an exploitative job offer, as they are presumed to face higher risks and are more risk-averse in various studies. Adding the influence of setting, however, we would expect men to be less vulnerable, as they are less likely to expect situational consequences from the offeror. As shown in Figure 2, the results of the estimations are inconclusive. Although we see a slightly positive effect of 0.4 scale points on a scale of 1–11, suggesting that men are more vulnerable to these job offers, the effect is clearly not significant, leading us to interpret this as an inconclusive result.

4.2. Structure: Social influence

Within the theorised framework, we postulated that vulnerability to exploitative labour offers could be gendered in both directions. However, we also expected that the effect of an additional person from the community would have a gendered interaction effect: via social norm signalling, we expect a men-pushing mechanism and a women-withholding mechanism via a gendered

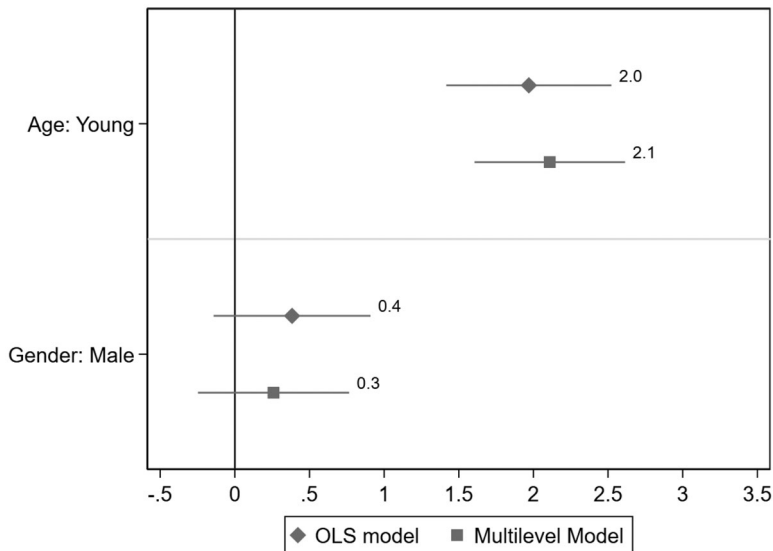


Figure 2. Effect of gender and age on vulnerability, i.e. acceptance of exploitative job-offer. Ordinary least squared regressions, using a OLS model and a multilevel model, with robust clustered standard errors by respondent; x-axis represents coefficients and standard error based on range of 1–11 scale points. The effect for age is statistically significant, the effect for gender is not (see also regression output [Appendix](#)).

protection. As revealed in [Figure 3](#) [left], there is no noteworthy difference in vulnerability effects between the two genders in the absence of a bystander. However, in the presence of a bystander (dashed line), men - but not women - are significantly more likely to accept the job offer, while the acceptability behaviour of women does not change at all. In other words, there is no acceptance-reducing effect of an additional person on gendered vulnerability for women. Men, in contrast, become more vulnerable in the presence of the additional person. Given our operationalisation of the treatment, we cannot make any evidence-based statements about how and whether the effects would behave with a different individual from the community. Due to social hierarchies, we would expect effects in the same direction, but on a smaller scale. Overall, the results of the interaction between gender and bystander support the signalling mechanism of social norms rather than protection.

4.3. Robustness

A natural question to ask is whether the outcome of men in the presence of a bystander is driven by the exploitative nature of the job offer, or whether we would have seen the same results for a ‘normal’ job offer. [Figure 3](#) [right] shows the bystander effect by gender for a job offer on a local farm. The graphical visualisation indicates rather the contrary picture to the exploitative job offer situation. While there is no relevant change for men concerning the presence or absence of the bystander, we see a women-pushing effect if the bystander is present (dashed line) in contrast to a lower vulnerability value if the woman is alone.

It would be reasonable to expect that people’s responses would be patterned according to their expectation of the genuineness of the offer. For example, one might hypothesise that people would perceive the job offer as more reasonable if a bystander was present in the scenario setting. Our estimates from analyses of whether the participant had experienced a setting similar to that of the scenario revealed higher than expected numbers, providing a first indirect indication of the perceived realness of the scenarios. Furthermore, we measure whether participants expect a job offer to be made in each scenario. A regression analysis of the experiment’s

Table 1. Effect of gender, age, and the situational presence of a bystander on vulnerability by gender, i.e. acceptance of exploitative job-offer

	Dependent variable: Likelihood taking job offer			
	Exploitative labour decision		(Normal) labour decision	
	OLS	Multi-level model	OLS	Multi-level model
Age: Young	1.940*** (0.28)	2.077*** (0.26)	1.836*** (0.26)	1.892*** (0.22)
Gender: Male	-0.055 (0.38)	-0.225 (0.36)	1.268*** (0.35)	1.280*** (0.31)
Bystander: Yes	0.139 (0.38)	0.017 (0.37)	0.859* (0.34)	0.723* (0.31)
Gender*Bystander	0.912+ (0.51)	0.985+ (0.52)	-1.097* (0.48)	-1.050* (0.44)
Constant	2.682*** (0.51)	2.632*** (0.47)	2.693*** (0.50)	2.681*** (0.42)
N	540	540	583	583
n		333		348
R-squared / LR	0.099	27.10	0.109	39.61

Ordinary least squared regressions, using an OLS model and a multilevel model, with robust clustered standard errors by respondent; dependent variable based on range of 1–11 scale points. + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.00$.

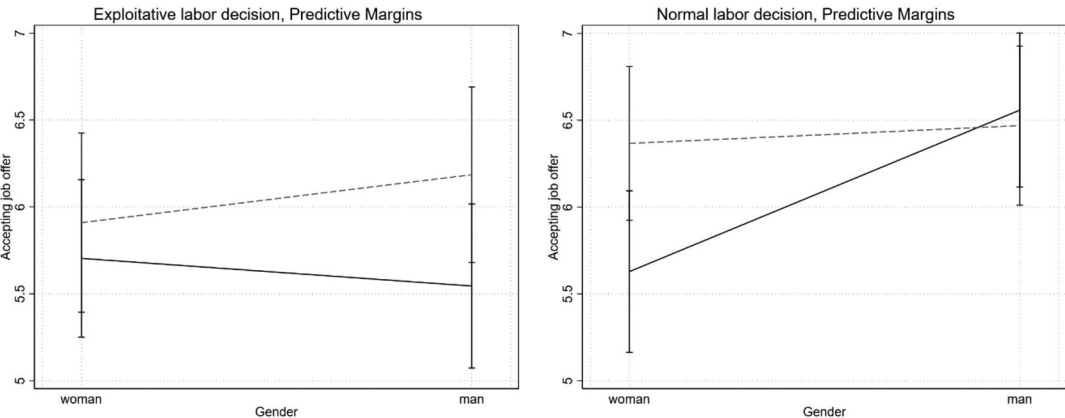


Figure 3. Interaction between gender and the situational presence of a bystander on vulnerability by gender, i.e. acceptance of (left) exploitative or (right) normal job-offer; dashed line = bystander present, solid line = no bystander present; Predictive margins based on ordinary least squared regressions, with robust clustered standard errors by respondent; dependent variable based on range of 1–11 scale points.

attributes on the expectation that the offeror in the scenario will offer a job to person B (see Appendix) reveals no significant estimate, with the exception of the attribute age. For the participants, the scenarios with an old (as opposed to young) person at the centre do not seem realistic. The conclusions of the age attribute should be interpreted with caution. However, the lack of significant effects based on scenario attributes implies that there is no pattern of more or less realistic job offer expectations based on the attribute variations of gender or bystander. It can, therefore, be concluded that these appear to be realistic.

A vignette experiment is based on the assumption that the respondent puts him-/herself in the position of the described person. The question ‘if you were in the situation of person B’ should, therefore, be answered in the form of a hypothetical behaviour. In other words, we

expect people to answer how they would behave if they were Person B. This is a strong assumption, especially with regard to gender and age. Although several studies on vignette experiments support this assumption with empirical evidence (Abraham et al., 2013; Kleinewiese 2021), including for demographic variables (see extensively Auspurg and Hinz, 2014), one might wonder to what extent people are capable of being a different gender or age and what we would be measuring if they were not fully capable of doing so.

Taking this theoretical exercise further, in the absence of full capacity to be Person B, we would expect to measure some form of social norms in response behaviour. We would expect people who fit the demographic category to respond in terms of a hypothetical behaviour and people in the opposite age or gender group to respond in terms of how they would expect a person of that demographic to behave. Given that the sample is balanced in terms of age and gender and that the attributes are randomly assigned, this would essentially add a layer of noise to the central results⁶.

We test the purity of our treatment manipulations by comparing respondents' response behaviour with their actual individual demographic characteristics (a) age and gender. In addition, we test for (b) the role of the participants' employment status (having a job/not having a job) and (c) two key variables from the theory that could lead to heterogeneous effects: marital status and poverty level. The results, presented in [Appendix Figure A2](#), show no substantial change in the results of the attributes of the vignette design. This is true for both the exploitative and the normal work scenario. These results lead us to conclude that respondents were able to engage with the vignette scenarios appropriately and relatively independently of their own background, which supports the stability of the main results described.

An interesting by-product of these additional analyses is that, unlike all the other variables, the poverty variable reveals significant direct (not heterogeneously varying) effects. People who fall into the poverty category, i.e. who report not having enough food in the household every day, are less likely to be engaged in exploitative or regular work. As with our main findings, on the first view, this again contradicts the common criminalisation-victimisation notion that the poor are most vulnerable to exploitative job offers that can lead to trafficking. Taking a closer look on the definitions and measurements of 'poor' used in the literature that finds evidence that poorer people are more vulnerable to such human trafficking recruitment, we find that what is studied is a different level of 'poor' and maybe better described as relatively poor or low socioeconomic status, not touching a basic need as daily food (Adhikari et al., 2023; Okonofua et al., 2004; Shrestha et al., 2015). The fact that it is the poorest who are less vulnerable to exploitative job offers is consistent with transition theories in the rational choice literature on regular migration, which suggests an inverted U-shaped probability of labour migration based on wealth (e.g. de Haas, 2010).

5. Conclusion

With our theoretical framework we show that an exploitative labour decision can be rational and, hence, emphasise the agency of targets in potential human trafficking recruitment situations. Using an original experimental dataset collected in Tanzania in 2023, we present evidence that gender does not necessarily affect vulnerability to an exploitative job offer. However, we find that an additional person from the community, a so-called bystander, has a gendered impact on the probability of vulnerability. While there is no change in vulnerability for women in the presence or absence of the bystander, we see a significant difference towards higher vulnerability for men in the presence of the community person. The results suggest that the presence of the community bystander acts as a reminder of a social norm. Here, men are pushed towards riskier and more adventurous or, to put it more bluntly, exploitative choices.

We cannot interpret our findings of no gender difference in vulnerability as a gender-balanced likelihood of becoming a victim of trafficking. The environment studied is the most

common scenario for the initiation of trafficking, but no more. In our experimental design, there is a 50% chance that a woman or a man will be in the described situation. The fact that there is no gender effect on vulnerability, contrary to the gender direction of structural victim statistics, may indicate that actual attempts on women, i.e. the likelihood by gender of being in such a situation, are even more frequent than originally thought. A reason for this may be a higher global demand for female victims of trafficking (Jac-Kucharski, 2012; Usman, 2014). The two predominant activities within the trafficking industry are forced labour and sex trafficking, albeit with the caveat that the reliability of such statistics from the black market is questionable (ILO-Walk Free-IOM, 2022). While sex trafficking is highly gendered, with women outnumbering men, forced labour is also common for women, particularly in the domestic service sector.

What we do observe, however, is a gendered moderation when a community bystander is present in the situation. While their presence does not reduce (or increase) vulnerability for women, it increases the likelihood for men. This finding links back to the question of whether (s)he is protected by the community and shows that there is a high untapped potential in the role of a community bystander in a trafficking prevention situation. Given that legal deterrence is less effective in some countries of the world, the role of the community becomes much more important. Given that only sensitive and appropriately targeted interventions have been shown to be effective (Zimmerman et al., 2021), future research and practitioners in the field of trafficking prevention would do well to consider the community level as a relevant target for their activities.

Notes

1. In this article, we differentiate between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. We use ‘sex’ to refer to sex identification based on biological categorisations, as well as sex display—that is, how a person’s is perceived by society in terms of their biological sex (see West and Zimmerman, 1987)—and we use ‘gender’ to refer to the socially constructed categorisation that is highly linked to social norms. However, while we make this distinction as researchers, we do not assume that the majority of respondents in our sample would do the same. In line with local customs of the studied population, we distinguish between only two categories of biological and social gender in this article.
2. Contrary to the general victimological framework, in our perspective agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive. Our notion of agency does not take away from the concept of victimisation nor reduces the burden on the perpetrator. NGOs are now taking a similar stance and plea for freedom of choice over protection at the expense of empowerment (Lisborg, 2017).
3. We define the median Arushan citizen based on the distribution along values in the Afrobarometer data wave 9. In the Afrobarometer data 48.6% of the Arusha sample are female, the average age is 41 years old, the level of education is in the median intermediate school, but this is highly driven by the wide distribution of primary school. 59% indicate to have completed only primary school; regarding religion the large majority is Christian, and the majority – around 65% - has some form of job (either part or full-time); 78% indicate that they have never gone without food. This question is commonly used as a proxy for poverty indication. Hence, we would attribute a low level of poverty likelihood for the median Arusha citizen.
4. This is additionally relevant as the “They are approached by a man” can be interpreted as plural in the English-version and, therefore, falsely be interpreted as multiple people receiving a job offer. In the Swahili-version the neutral gender pronoun is clearly singular and we, therefore, do not expect misunderstandings in the Swahili version and do not see any significant patterns of difference between respondents that received the English survey and those that received the Swahili version.
5. These informants were trustworthy contacts from the authors that were only involved in the treatment design, but not in later parts of the project, such as the sampling or data collection.
6. Assuming a situation of never-takers, i.e. that participants always answer “how things ought to be” fashioned, one would need to re-interpret the full paper through this lens, yet the implications based on the results would not change. However, given the vast literature on vignette effects, we expect this to be implausible.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Sandra Morgenstern**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Julia Kleinewiese**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors received ethical approval from the University of the authors prior to study implementation.

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Data availability statement

The data and replication will be made available after publication on the university's open science data repository.

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Appendix

Analyses

Table A1. Influence of scenario attributes and the likelihood of taking the job offer

	Dependent variable: Likelihood taking job offer	
	OLS with clustered standard errors at the individual level	Multi-level model
Age: young	1.970*** (0.28)	2.110*** (0.26)
Gender: Male	0.383 (0.27)	0.259 (0.26)
Constant	2.325*** (0.63)	2.326*** (0.59)
N	540	540
n		333
R-squared/LR	0.087	26.97

Robustness analyses

Realistic expectation measurement

Table A2. Descriptive on understanding

Q: Did you understand the scenarios?		
	Percent	Cum.
No	3,22	3,22
Yes	96,78	100
Total	100	

Table A3. Influence of scenario attributes and the expectation of a job offer; OLS regression with clustered standard errors at the individual level; DV = expectation of job offer

Dependent variable: Expectation: offer job realistic	
Age: young	0.525*** (0.04)
Gender: Male	0.095 (0.03)
Bystander: yes	0.049 (0.04)
Constant	−0.413*** (0.09)
N	540
R-squared	0.2895

Influenced by situation of respondent

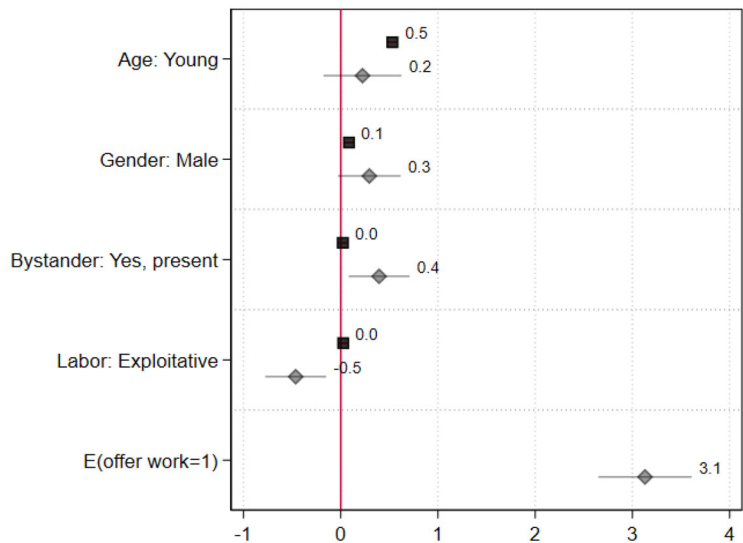


Figure A1. Robustness analyses on the Expectation of a job offer in the hypothetical scenario, E(offer work = 1); Square indicates the OLS regression with robust clustered standard errors for the dependent variable E(offer work = 1) and the diamond shape indicates the same analytical model, plus the variable ‘job offer: yes/no’ as an additional independent variable, for the dependent variable of the main analyses asking how likely the participant would take the job offer being in this situation.

Table A4. Robustness analyses on influence by situation of respondent

Dependent variable: Expectation: offer job realistic	
Age: young	1.268 (0.96)
Participant: Age: young	-0.309 (0.88)
Age * Participant:Age	0.578 (1.04)
Gender: Male	0.622 (0.49)
Participant: Gender: Male	-0.058 (0.62)
Gender * Participant Gender	-0.073 (0.75)
Bystander: yes	0.417 (0.37)
Constant	4.275*** (1.04)
N	540
R-squared	0.08



Figure A2. Robustness analyses on influence by situation of respondent; the variables starting with a 'P' indicate that these are based on the answering participant and not the person described in the scenario.

Comparison Afrobarometer wave 9 data

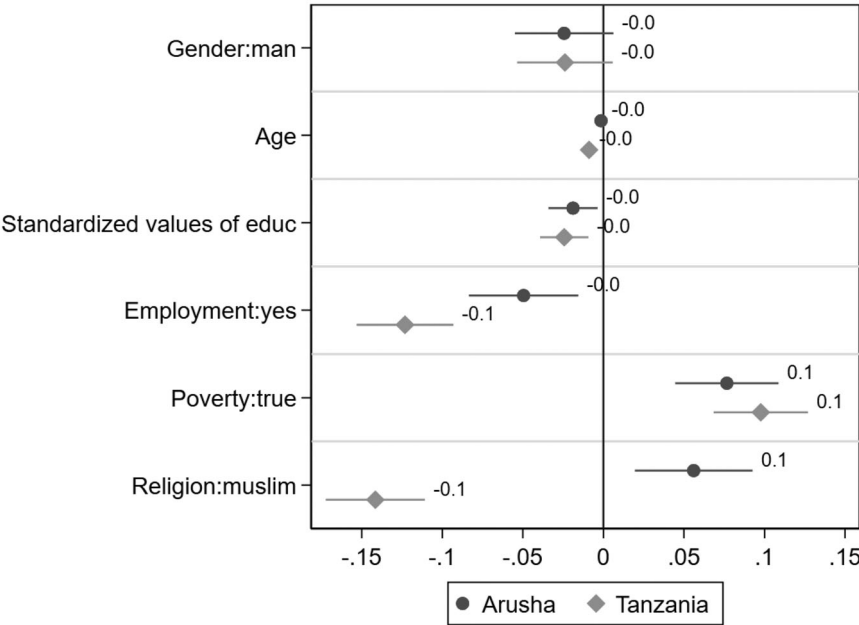


Figure A3. The graph shows the deviation of our dataset in comparison to the Afrobarometer wave 9 data - for the Afrobarometer sub-sample of Arusha (circle) and Tanzania (diamond).