

Leadership-in-Action Project Output: A Collection of Experiences and Musings on Gender Equality, Empowerment, and Female-led Community Change from a Window in Taipei



This summer, I had the privilege of spending six weeks at the Garden of Hope Foundation in Taipei as an intern with their International Affairs Center. While I was able to engage in various types of behind-the-scenes nonprofit work, my primary task was preparing for and helping run the Asian Girls Campaign: Asian Girls in Action Project power camp. Every year, the Campaign selects ten ‘Fellows’ aged 14-19—each with their own plans and proposals for their own community change projects—to come to Taiwan on a fully-funded empowerment camp and to receive funding for their projects.

The week of the camp was certainly my busiest week at the Foundation. Since the majority of the Fellows and their accompanying chaperones did not speak Mandarin, most days, I would join a few of my co-workers to meet them at their hotel in Taipei’s Ximending District early in the morning and accompany them to our headquarters in Xindian eight subway stops today, and travel back to their hotel with them at the end of the day before returning to my own apartment accommodation. I got to spend lots of time with these girls and had many meaningful conversations. They came to Taipei to learn from us, but throughout the week in the days after their departure, I realized that in many ways, I had learned more from them.



I arrived in Taiwan in late June, and the country greeted me with air humid and heavy with heat. Taking the bus through Taoyuan to Taipei, the city opened up around me with rows of flat-topped residential buildings and streets of double-parked motorcycles.

It took me a while to get used to the habits and the language, but from that very first day, I knew that I would love this city and country.

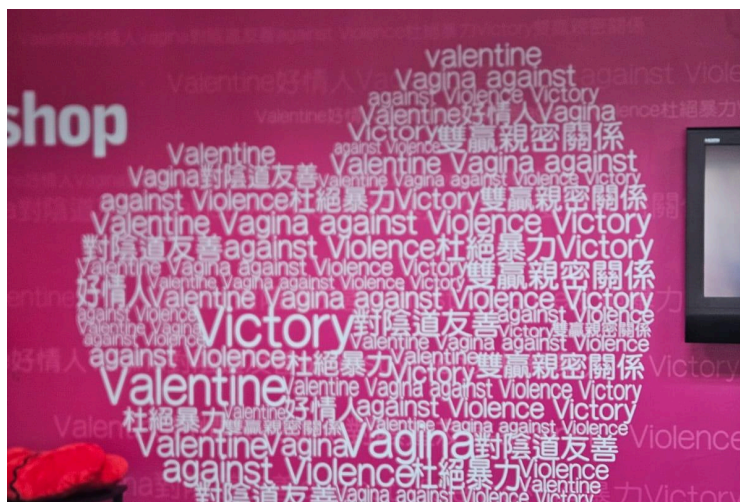


The night view from my room. I loved the juxtaposition of newer skyscrapers against older homes. Most places in Taipei still have mixed residential and commercial land use, so there were many restaurants and stores within walking distance! There were several 7/11s and Family Marts right across the street, and I got many a meal from there. Nothing beats an East Asian convenience store!

When I decided to go to Taiwan for my LiA, I was seeking something that would feel familiar enough to be safe but out of my comfort zone enough to be a challenge. It turned out to be exactly that.



The Garden of Hope Foundation (GoH) was founded in 1988 as a halfway home for women in need, especially those trapped in or at risk of sex trafficking. Now, it has grown into one of Taiwan and Asia's leading organizations for the empowerment of women and queer folk. While their primary aim is supporting victims of gender-and-sexuality-based violence through both immediate support and advocating for better legislature, they are also active participants in advancing the rights and protection of women everywhere.



Our distinctive 'v-shop' wall, found in every GoH facility.

The Foundation was made up of multiple different departments all focusing on different aspects of GoH's overall goal, and I interned with the International Affairs Center. As the name implies, this department was in charge of work that extended outside of Taiwan and represented GoH at international conferences and networks such as the Global Network of Women's Shelters and its Asia-specific counterpart. And, of course, we ran the Asian Girls Campaign (AGC), the highlight of my time at GoH.

This year, we had 10 Fellows from 10 different countries: Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Myanmar. Their work covered a wide range of different issues and SDGs, from preserving indigenous cultures to promoting STEM education to rural communities to providing reusable cloth diapers to infants and families in refugee camps. I was blown away and humbled by their strength, resilience, and above all, their unwavering faith in and hope for a better world.

In the weeks leading up to the camp, a strong anticipation hung in the air, especially for me, Irene, my immediate supervisor and lead AGC coordinator, and Annie, our other AGC coordinator. Before this, I never realized how much behind-the-scenes work went into organizing events of this scale. I was given organizational tasks that had never explicitly occurred to me but are obvious in retrospect, such as keeping a strong paper trail, managing food orders and dietary restrictions, and making name tags.



Preparing different colour posters for different events and hauling them around!



The International Affairs Center was made up of six incredible women (Irene, Annie, Ingrid, Patty, Yichia, and Cecilia) who were all incredibly supportive and encouraging. Even though I was an intern who had just arrived, from my very first day, they gave me explicit permission to ask questions and speak up and share my opinions whenever I wanted. I was also involved

in internal meetings and external meetings with different AGC partnering organizations from the very beginning. I remember attending an incredibly detailed meeting with our main camp partner, iEARN Taiwan, during my first week and really struggling to keep up with the discussion, my meeting minutes, and updating the shared schedule with my rudimentary Mandarin! Eventually, I just took my notes in English and slowly translated whenever I could during and after the meeting.

Other tasks I was responsible for included social media planning and posting, preparing information packages and presentation slides, and keeping track of food orders. I had never really worked with social media before, so this was a great opportunity for me to familiarize myself with Canva and graphic design in general. I learnt on the job and like to think I've improved a lot along the way! Keeping track of 20+ people's different dietary restrictions also sharpened my attention to detail. On a more practical note, I am now much more comfortable with Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets than I was before the summer! Besides these things, as an intern, I also helped with various miscellaneous tasks such as translating, copyediting, and I even had the chance to provide website design suggestions. These little side quests kept my day interesting and allowed me to engage with many different roles and tasks that were novel and enriching to me.

When the time finally arrived for us to meet the girls live and in-person, I'd be lying if I didn't say I was nervous. Having made two presentations introducing them individually, on paper, I was already familiar with their names, faces, and projects, but sharing the same space with them and hearing their voices and laughter, I got to know the individuals and the stories that fueled their passions.



The Fellows and their Chaperones: Their first day at the Garden of Hope.

Although young, these Fellows were absolutely brilliant. They threw themselves headfirst into the activities we had planned, playing hard and working even harder. I did my best to interact with them as much as I could because I genuinely wanted to get to know them, but at the end of the day, mine was a supporting role. Of course, I provided as much encouragement and accompaniment as I could, but these girls were the stars of the show.

My role as a photographer allowed me to fade into the background fairly easily. At the same time, it let me live in and capture beautiful moments, the smiles on their faces and the concentration in their eyes. Since I took photos on my phone, I could easily browse through my gallery to find pictures to use in the daily recap I posted on the AGC Instagram each night as part of the social media plan Annie and I came up with. This gave me the space and time to reflect on each day of the camp.

On the very first day of the camp, all the Fellows had the chance to introduce themselves and some even chose to do a little performance. Our Fellow from Myanmar decided to perform a traditional Burmese dance from her home village. Halfway through her performance, as we were swaying and clapping along to the music, she invited everyone, especially the other Fellows, to join hands and dance together. It was beautiful and truly set the spirit for a magical week full of celebration, camaraderie, and empowerment.



Dancing queens, young and sweet.

Another memorable day was when we brought the Fellows to a local youth centre affiliated with GoH. There, they had a cross-cultural appreciation and communication workshop, a facility tour where they learned about the different ways the centre supported teenagers, and a gender advocacy workshop. The youth centre was on the other side of town and rather difficult to reach via public transport, so my GoH colleagues and I met the Fellows and Chaperones at their hotel to take taxis with them to and from the center. We chatted on the taxi as Taipei's buildings sped past us and we compared and contrasted the city with our own hometowns.

Honestly, that was only the start of the day's fun. When we were briefing them about their Taiwan trip, we had told them to prepare a traditional outfit from their culture. During the cross-cultural workshop with our partners Orange Gibbon, they swapped clothes for an

intercultural fashion show and catwalk. I had put together an upbeat playlist for them to walk to and had a great time DJ-ing and cheering them on from the sidelines!

Most of the rest of the camp was dedicated to helping the girls develop their own unique projects with as much detail and planning as possible. They all gave final presentations about the aims of their project and their implementation. They went into detail about the parties involved, their target audience, likely and potential setbacks and their solutions, and a timeline planning out their next steps. After each presentation, the audience, which consisted of the GoH team, iEARN Taiwan teachers and students, and the other AGC Fellows and Chaperones, asked questions and offered feedback and suggestions.

I will always remember the pride I felt at their ambition, empathy, and determination. As they talked, we could all tell that these causes were deeply important to them and woven into the fabric of their worlds. In that moment, it struck once again me that we made the right decision by choosing to stand by these girls. We cannot (and probably should not) attempt to play the role of 'saviour' in their communities. We do not 'know better'. Perhaps they could do with a little help along the way, but these girls absolutely can and will change their communities and futures.

And in a full circle moment, on the final day of the camp, the last thing all our Fellows did together was dance.

Looking back , I keep going back to their joy. Many of these girls came from countries and environments where misogyny is rampant and women have very little agency over their own lives. Even with all these odds against them, these girls were undeterred. They didn't let their oppression strip away their determination or their delight and excitement towards the world and what it could offer them. Despite everything, these girls dared to dream.



Our last group photo. I miss this bunch!

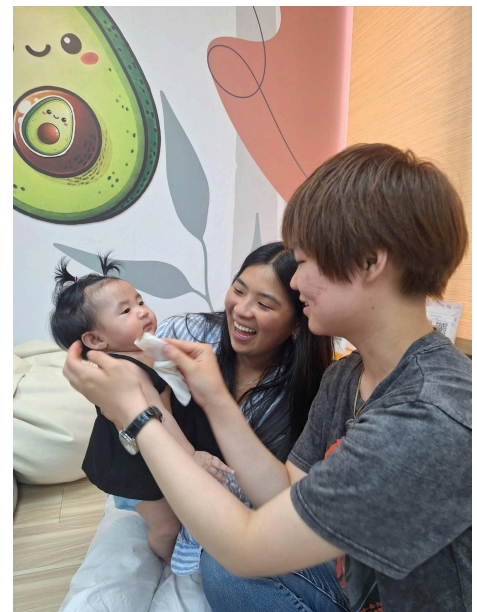


There are lists and lists of adjectives I could use to describe my summer. Transformative, insightful, humbling, exciting, life-changing, fun—all true. But I titled this post ‘A Collection of Experiences and Musings’, so with regards to the most personal takeaways, I will try to show instead of tell. In no particular order:

Early morning and late night subway rides accompanying the Fellows and Chaperones to and from their hotel. I love the Taipei subway system. It’s clean, quick, and always on time. I would make small talk with everyone as they got ready for or wind down from the day. It was lighter conversation than the topics we discussed during workshops and activities, and we got to know each other more casually. I learnt their favourite colours and foods and they learnt mine. We traded stories about school and our hobbies and taught each other snippets of our native languages. During our ‘official hours’, to a certain extent, we were all draped in the responsibilities and expectations of our respective roles. On the subway, that could all fall away and we could just be individuals laughing after a long day.

GoH Migrant Services Centre Doctors Without Borders event.

I had the opportunity to attend an event in Taoyuan that supported migrant workers in Taiwan with Lecia, the other International Affairs intern (and a Laidlaw Scholar at Tufts!!) and Patty, one of our GoH colleagues. There were sharings from two doctors who worked with Doctors Without Borders, and they talked about the importance of their work and shared stories about their time helping residents in underfunded, rural, and conflict-occupied areas. Many attendees were women with babies or pregnant women and I saw how they all helped and supported each other. That is still what sticks with me today. When a baby got particularly fussy, everyone took turns holding and playing with it so the mother could rest. Eventually, the baby was passed to me and Lecia. I’m not very good with babies so Lecia did most of the carrying and entertaining, but I remember holding that tiny human being in my hands that suddenly seemed massive, getting sneezed on, and wiping its little face.



Lecia’s birthday celebration. Lecia turned 21 during our last few weeks of internship, and, knowing how important the 21st birthday is to Americans, our colleagues threw here a little surprise party! I was also in on the plan and had to make sure Lecia was coming into the office the day of. They had prepared eight slices of different types of cake for everyone to choose from, a birthday sash and tiara for Lecia, and gifts for us both. This took place a few days after the AGC Power Camp so we were all still a little tired out and running off the adrenaline high of week before. That plus the cake made for a room full of wild laughter and fun stories. It really sweet of them, and it showed how much they genuinely cared about us and considered us part of the team. It is one of my favourite memories from my time at GoH.

Our first lunch and last dinner with the team. On Lecia and I's very first day, our colleagues took us out to one of their favourite restaurants near our office. It was a hotpot and noodle restaurant and each meal came with unlimited self-service drinks, popcorn, and ice cream. I ordered a bowl of knife-cut noodles with sliced pork in a rich tomato broth and helped myself to their free snacks, all for less than £7. We got to know each other over Taiwanese wintermelon tea and noodles and chatted about everything from our favourite singers to Taiwan's political election system. That was our first meal together as a team. For our last meal together, our colleagues took us out to this really nice roast duck restaurant where the star of the show was a whole duck the staff would slice up in front of us accompanied with around ten different side dishes. It was DELICIOUS. The food was amazing and the company even more so. Both times, our colleagues refused to let us pay! Lecia and I both tried, but coming from Chinese-heritage families, we knew that it was futile—there was no winning a fight over a bill with Asian aunties!



The team helping us make the absolute most of Taiwan. Genuinely, I don't think I would have enjoyed my time in Taiwan as much if I didn't have as enthusiastic and caring a group of colleagues. They really did their best to make sure I could enjoy Taiwan to its fullest by giving lots of recommendations, tips, and even showing us around themselves. Food is absolutely a love language in Asia, and Taiwan is no different. Irene always sent me the best restaurant recommendations and even asked her daughter to bring me to their family's favourite mango shaved ice shop, Patty took us to an underground shopping mall and a really nice restaurant with some of the best popcorn chicken and corn ribs I've ever had, and Yichia went with us on a nighttime walk through Dadaocheng, one of Taiwan's oldest streets, and to a night market for local deserts afterwards. They knew our time in Taiwan was limited, and they wanted us to experience the best of it and pass our days with happier spirits, especially since our work often dealt with very heavy topics such as domestic violence and sexual assault. They made sure we could experience a Taiwan that was local and genuine.



I believe in the importance of gratitude, and this summer has changed me and brought me so much more than I expected. I walk away from my six weeks with the Garden of Hope with stronger Mandarin, a newfound type of confidence, and an even deeper appreciation for bottom-up community work. It was so fulfilling to work on a project with this type of immediate relevancy and use with such important foundational value. Without a strong bottom-up core, any sweeping top-down legislation has no solid groundwork. While grand events such as new legislation are important indicators and protectors of change, it's the little things that create change and build the movement. It's every girl empowered, every victim helped, every person given another chance and told that they are not alone, that they are not irreparably broken, and that, above all, they are loved. It's everyone told that they *can*. It was an honour to contribute in whatever way I could to this work.

Beyond the job, Taiwan gave me independence I've never experienced before. Here, there were no real preconceptions of me as a person with a unique personality that I had to live up to. I could be someone entirely different, or I could be entirely, wholly, myself. It was like a breath of fresh air and a completely new beginning, a blank slate for me to fill as I wished. I grew to become more settled in both being myself and being by myself, and I learnt to build a place for myself in a city that, in the best way possible, didn't know me at all. Although there were times where I felt lost and impossibly alone, they were fewer than the moments of adventure and delight. At the end of it all, I leave Taipei with a stronger sense of who I am and with the confidence that I can adapt and find a place full of joy for myself no matter where I go.



I first and foremost thank my team of colleagues at the Garden of Hope, especially my immediate supervisor, Irene, for taking a chance on me. They encouraged and guided me through my various responsibilities, giving me space and freedom to figure things out for myself but always being ready to step in when needed. I thank them for letting me be a real, active part of the team. I am grateful for their trust.

The GoH International Affairs team circa July 2025. Without them, I would not have enjoyed my LiA nearly as much as I did! I miss them all a lot and hope our paths may cross again.

I also thank Lecia, my fellow intern and Laidlaw Scholar, and Elle, another overseas-based intern who for the Migrants Centre. We had our day one orientation together and became fast friends. We would embark on various after-work adventures, including night markets,

shopping malls, and even more night markets. All three of us loved trying new foods and made the perfect night market trio as we would often order different things and just share them so we could experience as many new flavours as possible!



The night market girlies sharing some dragonfruit!

My heartfelt thanks to the girls of the AGC. I had a wonderful time with them and learned a lot, and I can only hope that my presence brought them something as well. I'll be keeping an eye out for them in the news!

Of course, I must also thank the Laidlaw Foundation for this wonderful opportunity, and my friends and family for their support throughout. I would not have had the means or the motivation to seek out this experience if not for the Laidlaw Foundation and for that, I am endlessly grateful. My friends and family also provided me with great comfort and encouragement during my time abroad, and I would not have made it through the loneliest days without them. I would love to share the Taiwan I've discovered with them someday!

And finally, I must thank myself. Before I started, I was doubtful of my ability to survive, nevermind thrive, in an entirely Mandarin-speaking environment and nervous to be moving from more theoretical and research-based work into something hands on and immediate. I thank the Rachel who was terrified and decided to seize the day anyway. I couldn't have managed any of it alone, but I have to be proud of myself as well. I am deeply thankful for every experience and everyone I have met along the way to bring me to who I am today.

As I continue on in my path, wherever it takes me, I will carry these times in my heart. I will continue to use my voice and abilities to speak up and advocate for others and to transform our present world into a brighter future.

謝謝大家, 我愛您們!

