



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
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Expanding Access to Legal Education and Justice for MDWs in Hong Kong:

Leadership-in-Action Project Final Report

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Introduction

Access to justice depends not only on the legal rights individuals possess, but also on their ability to understand, navigate, and exercise those rights. In Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers (MDWs) face significant barriers to accessing legal information and protections, leaving many particularly vulnerable to financial exploitation and employment-related abuses. My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project explored barriers to legal education and access to justice in Hong Kong, particularly among marginalized communities whose ability to navigate the legal system is constrained by language, socioeconomic circumstances, or limited access to practical legal knowledge. My initial project proposal identified two populations facing distinct but significant challenges: migrant domestic workers, who are particularly vulnerable to financial exploitation and employment-related abuses, and deaf individuals interested in pursuing legal careers, who often lack access to tailored educational opportunities and inclusive programming. The broader objective was to support Street Law HK's model of accessible, skills-based legal education while developing a targeted anti-scam and fraud prevention workshop for MDWs in collaboration with EmpowerU. Ultimately, I hoped to contribute to replicable, community-centered educational initiatives that could increase legal awareness, reduce vulnerability to exploitation, and make the legal system more accessible to underserved populations.

Over the course of my six-week placement in Hong Kong, my project evolved beyond its original scope. While I completed the planned anti-scam workshop with migrant domestic workers and helped deliver a second Street Law workshop for secondary school students, I also became involved with Justice Without Borders (JWB), an international legal aid organization supporting migrant domestic workers in employment disputes and other cross-border legal

matters. This additional work introduced a more direct dimension of legal advocacy to my project. Rather than focusing exclusively on preventative education, I gained exposure to the legal and institutional challenges that arise when individuals have already experienced exploitation or abuse.

My work ultimately encompassed three interconnected areas: preventative legal and financial education, broader legal literacy, and community-centered legal advocacy. Together, these experiences helped me better understand both the potential and limitations of educational interventions in addressing barriers to justice.

Objective 1: Develop and Deliver an Accessible Anti-Scam and Fraud Prevention

Workshop for Migrant Domestic Workers

The first major objective of my project was to design and pilot a practical anti-scam and fraud prevention workshop for migrant domestic workers in collaboration with EmpowerU. This objective addressed the vulnerability of MDWs to financial exploitation, fraudulent recruitment practices, illegal lending, and other schemes that can be particularly difficult to navigate without accessible legal and financial information.

Before arriving in Hong Kong, I conducted preliminary research into the legal and financial circumstances of migrant domestic workers. This research introduced me to the structural constraints shaping their employment and financial security, including the two-year employment contract system, the requirement to secure new employment within 14 days following termination, restrictions on residence and permitted employment, and the financial burdens associated with recruitment agencies. However, my first week in Hong Kong

demonstrated the importance of supplementing this academic understanding with direct exposure to the community.

I attended an EmpowerU financial literacy session and observed participants actively engaging with a presentation on personal finance. Their questions reflected a strong interest in financial independence, but conversations with my supervisor also highlighted the structural limitations that complicate this goal. Many workers arrive in Hong Kong carrying substantial recruitment-related debt, while their employment arrangements constrain their ability to change jobs or pursue additional income. These observations informed my approach to the workshop: rather than treating participants as individuals who simply lacked financial knowledge, I wanted to develop programming that recognized their existing knowledge and provided practical tools within the circumstances they actually faced.

During my second week, I took primary responsibility for translating our initial ideas into a complete three-hour workshop. Working with the other interns, I developed and tested interactive simulations designed to help participants recognize potential scams and practice responding to them. We also incorporated an additional AI literacy component to address the increasing use of AI-generated images, impersonation, and manipulated content in fraudulent schemes. I prepared the presentation deck, developed a detailed run-of-show, and created printed materials for the various activities.

One important aspect of the curriculum development process was learning to distinguish between activities that were simply engaging and those that meaningfully advanced our educational objectives. We initially generated more potential exercises than we could reasonably include. Testing these scenarios with other interns allowed us to identify activities that required additional explanation or did not sufficiently reinforce the concepts we wanted participants to

understand. Through this iterative process, we developed a more focused curriculum that prioritized practical application over the volume of information presented.

On May 31, we delivered the three-hour workshop to approximately 30 migrant domestic workers. Participants were highly engaged throughout the session, particularly during the interactive simulations. Rather than relying on a lecture-based format, we encouraged participants to identify suspicious situations, discuss potential warning signs, and consider how they might respond to different forms of fraud.

To evaluate the workshop's effectiveness, we administered pre- and post-workshop surveys measuring participants' knowledge and confidence regarding the topics covered. The results demonstrated increases in both measures following the session. Although the sample size was relatively small and the surveys primarily captured self-reported knowledge and confidence rather than long-term behavioral changes, the results provided an initial indication that the workshop achieved some of its intended educational outcomes.

However, the workshop also revealed limitations in what a single educational intervention can accomplish. Increasing someone's ability to recognize a fraudulent loan or recruitment scheme does not eliminate the economic circumstances that may make them vulnerable to exploitation. Legal education can provide individuals with additional resources to make informed decisions, but it cannot independently resolve the structural inequalities underlying many of the problems they face. Recognizing this distinction became an important part of evaluating the project's impact.

Objective 2: Expand Access to Practical Legal Education Through Street Law

Programming

A second component of my initial proposal was to support Street Law HK's broader mission of making legal knowledge more accessible through inclusive and participatory educational programming.^b Although my original proposal envisioned programming for deaf individuals interested in pursuing legal careers, my placement ultimately provided opportunities to contribute to two different educational initiatives. The first was the anti-scam workshop for migrant domestic workers described above. The second was a legal literacy workshop for secondary school students in the New Territories.

The second Street Law workshop introduced students to the general structure of Hong Kong's legal system before moving into two case simulations, one criminal and one civil. Students alternated between acting as clients and legal counsel, allowing them to engage with legal processes from different perspectives. Rather than simply memorizing institutional structures or legal terminology, they were encouraged to apply their understanding to hypothetical situations and experience how legal disputes are addressed.

This workshop required a different approach from the EmpowerU session. Whereas the anti-scam workshop focused on a specific practical vulnerability affecting adults already navigating Hong Kong's employment and financial systems, the secondary school workshop aimed to make the legal system approachable for students with limited prior exposure to legal education. Developing interactive simulations allowed us to adapt the subject matter to their interests and level of familiarity.

Both workshops reinforced the importance of accessible legal education as a means of expanding people's ability to understand and engage with institutions that affect their lives. They also demonstrated that accessibility requires more than simplifying complicated information. It

requires considering the audience, anticipating their questions, and creating opportunities for them to actively engage with the material.

Although I did not ultimately undertake the deaf-focused programming originally envisioned in my proposal, my Street Law experience advanced the broader objective of supporting inclusive, skills-based legal education. It also helped me recognize the importance of remaining adaptable when implementing a project in an unfamiliar organizational context. The specific opportunities available through my placement differed from my initial expectations, but they remained connected to the central goal of making legal knowledge more accessible.

Objective 3: Deepen My Understanding of Access to Justice Through Community

Engagement and Legal Advocacy

An unexpected but particularly meaningful development during my placement was my involvement with Justice Without Borders. Through an introduction from my supervisor at Street Law, I connected with JWB, an organization providing legal assistance to migrant domestic workers facing employment-related disputes and other forms of exploitation. This experience expanded my project beyond educational programming and gave me a closer understanding of the legal problems that can arise when workers are unable to protect their rights or navigate existing institutional processes.

My initial responsibilities included organizing case chronologies, locating and requesting documents, and conducting background research on the Hong Kong legal system. One particularly substantial assignment involved developing a chronology for a case that was more than five years old and concerned alleged abuses extending across more than two decades.

Organizing the information required me to distinguish between different events, documents, and stages of the dispute while constructing an accurate account of the client's circumstances.

This work demonstrated the importance of careful documentation in legal advocacy. A chronology is not simply an administrative summary: it can shape how a client's experience is understood and how an organization develops its legal strategy. I therefore had to be attentive to inconsistencies, distinguish documented facts from assumptions, and recognize when additional information was necessary.

My involvement with JWB also introduced me to its Healthcheck initiative, a community outreach project designed to assess migrant domestic workers' employment satisfaction, knowledge of their legal rights, and living conditions. An important feature of the initiative was its emphasis on co-creation. Rather than developing a survey entirely within the organization, JWB sought input from migrant domestic workers themselves to determine which questions were most relevant to their experiences.

I helped prepare the first Healthcheck session by refining survey questions, developing facilitation prompts, organizing logistical arrangements, and preparing translated materials for Indonesian participants. During the session, I worked with the other interns to facilitate and document conversations with migrant domestic workers about their transition to Hong Kong, employment conditions, and understanding of their rights.

The conversations revealed experiences that made the structural challenges facing workers considerably more tangible. Participants described being required to perform work outside their contractual responsibilities, including unpaid labor for employers' family members or at additional properties. One participant described being responsible for approximately 60 chickens despite her contract referring only to caring for a couple of pets. Others discussed

physically demanding work without appropriate safety protections, being asked to administer medical injections despite lacking medical training, and experiencing sexual harassment or severe restrictions on personal privacy within their living arrangements. Several also described financial exploitation by recruitment agencies before arriving in Hong Kong.

These conversations demonstrated why direct community engagement is essential to understanding access-to-justice issues. Formal legal documents and existing research can identify recurring patterns of abuse, but they cannot necessarily capture the full circumstances shaping an individual's experience. The Healthcheck gave participants an opportunity to describe their own priorities and challenges, while providing JWB with information that could inform its future outreach and advocacy. Following the session, we compiled the conversations and findings into a comprehensive report for the organization. This required careful attention to accuracy and representation, as we were responsible for translating participants' experiences into information that could be used beyond the immediate outreach session.

By the end of my placement, I had also contributed to preparations for a larger co-creation session that would include both Indonesian and Filipina migrant domestic workers. Although I would leave Hong Kong before that session took place, the survey materials and groundwork we developed could be carried forward by JWB. This was an important outcome in itself: the project was not dependent on my continued presence to have value.

My legal casework also raised difficult questions about the relationship between accuracy and advocacy. In one long-running case, another intern and I identified inconsistencies in the client's narrative. I felt it was important to clarify these discrepancies before continuing to develop the case materials. After consulting our manager, I learned more about the client's limited English proficiency, lack of resources, and the procedural history that had left little room

for further revisions. The situation demonstrated that apparent inconsistencies cannot always be understood independently of the conditions under which a person communicates their experiences.

This experience deepened my understanding of ethical advocacy. Accuracy is essential, particularly when legal work may influence the outcome of a client's case. At the same time, an effective advocate must understand the barriers that can prevent clients from communicating their experiences clearly and consistently. The responsibility is not simply to construct a coherent narrative, but to ensure that the narrative reflects the person's actual circumstances.

Objective 4: Develop a More Sustainable and Community-Centered Approach to Legal Education

An overarching goal of my original proposal was to contribute to educational models that could be replicated and sustained beyond my six-week placement. The materials developed for the EmpowerU workshop, including the presentation, scenario exercises, and structured run-of-show, provided a concrete foundation for future educational programming. Similarly, my contributions to JWB's Healthcheck survey and outreach materials supported an initiative that would continue after my departure.

However, sustainability requires more than leaving behind educational materials. It also depends on whether those materials remain relevant to the communities they are intended to serve, whether organizations have the capacity to implement them, and whether programming can adapt as community needs change.

The Healthcheck's co-creation model was particularly instructive in this respect. By involving migrant domestic workers in the development of its survey, JWB was building a

process through which future programming could be informed by the community itself. This approach was more sustainable than relying exclusively on outside organizations to determine what information or services workers needed.

My attendance at the Chicago Booth NGO Leadership Conference also expanded my understanding of the organizational conditions that make nonprofit work sustainable. Conversations about nonprofit management, funding models, technology, and organizational leadership demonstrated that even well-designed interventions depend on the institutions and relationships supporting them. An educational initiative cannot have a lasting impact simply because its curriculum is effective; it also needs organizational capacity, community trust, and mechanisms for continued implementation.

While I did not independently establish a long-term program or measure the sustained effects of the workshop, I contributed materials, research, and groundwork that could support continued work by the organizations involved. I also gained a clearer understanding of what sustainability should mean in community-centered projects: not simply preserving an intervention, but creating the conditions for it to evolve in response to the people it serves.

Leadership Development and Personal Outcomes

Beyond the project's tangible deliverables, my six weeks in Hong Kong significantly developed my understanding of leadership.

At the beginning of the placement, I associated leadership primarily with taking initiative, organizing projects, and producing measurable outcomes. My experience gradually complicated that understanding. I learned that responsible leadership also requires knowing when to listen,

recognizing the limitations of one's own perspective, and remaining willing to revise an approach when new information challenges existing assumptions.

Three values became particularly important throughout the placement: curiosity, humility, and integrity.

Curiosity motivated me to move beyond the immediate responsibilities of my project and understand the broader systems shaping migrant domestic workers' experiences. It encouraged me to explore Hong Kong's legal institutions, learn from nonprofit leaders, and ask questions about the structural causes of the problems I encountered.

Humility became increasingly important as I recognized the limits of my own understanding. Before arriving in Hong Kong, I had researched the legal circumstances of migrant domestic workers, but direct engagement revealed how much remained outside what I could learn through academic research alone. The Healthcheck reinforced that responsible community engagement requires listening to individuals rather than assuming that an outside perspective can fully capture their needs.

Integrity was especially important in my legal casework and documentation responsibilities. Whether preparing a case chronology or compiling Healthcheck findings, I had to recognize that my work represented the circumstances of people whose experiences were not my own. Accuracy, careful documentation, and an awareness of what I did not know were therefore essential.

I also developed three complementary leadership capacities: people, process, and performance. People leadership became particularly important during the workshops and Healthcheck sessions, where I needed to communicate effectively, facilitate conversations, and respond to different audiences. Process leadership was central to developing the workshop

curriculum, coordinating outreach activities, and organizing legal documentation. Performance leadership required me to take responsibility for completing substantive work under deadlines while maintaining accuracy and quality.

Living and working in Hong Kong independently also strengthened my ability to navigate unfamiliar environments. Language was one of my earliest challenges. Although I speak Mandarin, Cantonese is the dominant language in Hong Kong, and I quickly realized that linguistic familiarity does not necessarily translate into confidence in navigating a new cultural environment. These experiences encouraged me to become more attentive to the relationship between language, identity, and access to institutions.

Conclusion and Future Commitments

My six-week Leadership-in-Action placement advanced my original objectives by producing and delivering an anti-scam and fraud prevention workshop for approximately 30 migrant domestic workers, contributing to broader Street Law programming, and supporting JWB's community outreach and legal advocacy work. The pre- and post-workshop surveys indicated improvements in participants' self-reported knowledge and confidence, while the Healthcheck produced information that could inform JWB's continued outreach and advocacy. I also developed practical educational materials, gained experience with legal casework, and contributed to preparations for future community engagement.

At the same time, the placement changed how I understand the problem I initially set out to address. I began with the assumption that expanding access to legal knowledge was an important way to reduce vulnerability to exploitation. I still believe that it is, but I now recognize

that access to justice is shaped by a much broader set of conditions, including economic insecurity, language barriers, institutional trust, and unequal power relationships.

My experience reinforced the importance of connecting preventative education with broader legal and community support. Educational interventions can help individuals recognize risks and better understand their rights, while legal aid organizations provide assistance when those rights are violated. Neither can independently eliminate the structural inequalities that produce vulnerability, but both can contribute meaningfully to improving individuals' ability to navigate those conditions.

Moving forward, I hope to continue pursuing work at the intersection of law, economic policy, and access to justice. I will carry forward the lessons of this placement by approaching community engagement with greater humility, evaluating interventions honestly, and remaining attentive to the people whose experiences inform my work. Ultimately, the most important outcome of my Leadership-in-Action project was not simply the completion of several educational and outreach initiatives, but a more developed understanding of what it means to contribute responsibly to a community and to lead with both purpose and humility.

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