

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Unit of Assessment (UoA): 33 Linguistics & Language studies

Title of case study: Empowerment, social activism and intervention: Improving the lives of domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong and Indonesia.

(1) Summary of the impact

Research carried out at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) into the situation of Domestic Migrant Workers (DMWs) in Hong Kong has led to impacts on the policies, practices and legal case work of several NGOs in Hong Kong. One of the NGOs used the work to re-focus their Home Country Integration Programme for DMWs from Indonesia very substantially, shifting the emphasis from skills training to resilience and social support; another drew on the research in their legal case work for the rights of Indonesian DMWs in danger of being deported from Hong Kong. The research also substantially influenced a theatre company in producing a well-reviewed play about the lives of DMWs. This play, alongside the researcher's media engagement, led to substantial public debate about DMWs and raised awareness and understanding of their situation among the general public in Hong Kong.

(2) Underpinning research

There are 370,000 DMWs in Hong Kong, almost all of them female and originating mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines. They work as live-in maids on two-year contracts in order to send remittances to their families in their home countries. Exploitation and abuse are commonly reported, and re-integration into their home communities after the end of their contracts can pose serious problems.

It is the situation of these domestic workers that has been the focus of two research projects conducted by Professor Hans Ladegaard, Head of English, who joined PolyU on 1 September 2015. The first was carried out between 2010 and 2013, when he was working for Hong Kong Baptist University, the second – which is the focus of this case study – at PolyU; some of the research outputs from the first project and all outputs from the second, which was supported by a HK\$526,000 grant from the University Grants Committee, were published after he joined PolyU.

The project began as voluntary work at a church shelter for DMWs. Narratives from sharing sessions with newcomers to the shelter were recorded over a 4-year period, and because of Ladegaard's research interests, the project was converted to a research project. The data from the first project comprise more than 300 narratives in which DMWs share their stories with a group of 4-5 friends. The major findings for the portion of the work done at PolyU included: documenting the linguistic structures and emotional characteristics of trauma narratives (Ladegaard 2015); documenting the characteristic features of trauma storytelling and the socio-psychological issues that are involved (Ladegaard 2017a); and providing evidence that years of separation between DMWs and their loved ones lead to destruction of families, alienation and identity struggles (Ladegaard 2017b; 2018a; 2019). All major research findings were also compiled in a book providing documentation of the widespread exploitation and abuse of DMWs in Hong Kong (Ladegaard 2017a).

The second part of the project investigated DMWs' experiences of return to their home country after years of separation from close family members. 112 DMWs who had recently returned to their home country participated in sharing sessions in 19 villages in East and Central Java

(Indonesia) and in Bohol (the Philippines). The sessions focused on the women's past experiences working overseas, and/or their experiences of coming home. The major findings included: the women were struggling to overcome the destructiveness of distance (Ladegaard 2018a) and reunite with estranged family members, particularly the children who often rejected their mothers, or husbands who may have taken a mistress. Coming home therefore involved a reinventing of self and a redefinition of 'home' in order to embrace the unfamiliar home context (Ladegaard 2019). The study also made a contribution to research on codeswitching and emotion, showing through detailed linguistic analyses that emotional expression and a change of code are aligned, possibly to lessen the emotional impact of recollecting traumatic memories (Ladegaard 2018b).

(3) References to the research

1. Ladegaard, H. J. (2015) Coping with trauma in domestic migrant worker narratives: Linguistic, emotional and psychological perspectives. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 19:2, 189-221.
2. Ladegaard, H. J. (2017a) *The Discourse of Powerlessness and Repression: Life Stories of Domestic Migrant Workers in Hong Kong*. London: Routledge.
3. Ladegaard, H. J. (2017b) 'We're only here to help': Identity struggles in foreign domestic helper narratives. In D. v. d. Mieroop and S. Schnurr (eds.), *Identity Struggles. Evidence from Workplaces around the World* (pp. 427-443). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
4. Ladegaard, H. J. (2018a) The destructiveness of distance: Unfaithful husbands and absent mothers in domestic migrant worker narratives. In J. A. Drzewiecka and T. K. Nakayama (eds.), *Global Dialectics in Intercultural Communication* (pp. 21-41). New York: Peter Lang.
5. Ladegaard, H. J. (2018b) Codeswitching and emotional alignment: Talking about abuse in domestic migrant worker returnee narratives. *Language in Society* 47:5, 693-714.
6. Ladegaard, H. J. (2019) Reconceptualising 'home', 'family' and 'self': Identity struggles in domestic migrant worker returnee narratives. *Language and Intercultural Communication* 19:3, 289-303.

(4) Details of the impact

There are at least three types of impact that have come out of Ladegaard's research at PolyU: 1) changes in policies and practice at PathFinders, one of the NGOs Ladegaard collaborated with; 2) legal impacts via Justice Centre Hong Kong, who used his research in their report on forced migration as well as court cases to argue against the deportation of unmarried Indonesian migrant mothers and their children; and 3) cultural impact through a theatre production using narratives from Ladegaard's 2017a book as well as extensive interviews with the author in a performance, which led to increased awareness and understanding of the situation of DMWs in Hong Kong among the general public. There were also 'downstream' impacts on other NGOs working with DMWs, notably in Indonesia, as well as media coverage that led to public debate and further raised awareness and understanding of the situation of DMWs among the general public in Hong Kong.

Ladegaard's fieldtrip to Indonesia was organised in close collaboration with migrant worker NGOs in Hong Kong and Indonesia, and research findings were therefore 'given back' to them in the form of reports (with recommendations) and talks for staff and volunteers at local NGOs. This included PathFinders (June 2015, September 2017) [1], a migrant worker NGO in Hong Kong which works particularly for migrant women who get pregnant while working overseas; and Justice Centre Hong Kong (June 2018) [2], an NGO working to protect the rights of HK's most vulnerable migrants. The results were also made available to Mission for Migrant Workers [4], where Ladegaard had begun his fieldwork.

The women PathFinders work with normally lose their jobs when falling pregnant, and as they cannot return to Indonesia without being married, they usually stay in Hong Kong illegally with great risks of deportation or imprisonment. PathFinders give them shelter, food and medical and legal advice, and also provide them with training in areas such as jewelry making and handicraft in order for them to make a living when they return to Indonesia. An important finding in the Indonesian data was that migrant women returning to rural Java were unable to use the work-related skills they had acquired through PathFinders' training. First, because the communities they return to are so poor that nobody can afford jewelry or clothes, and second, because many of the women are literally ostracised from their local community because they bring back an 'illegitimate' child and no husband. Some of the women had been relegated to huts outside the village, or they were hidden away at the back of their parents' house, or distant relatives had taken them in. They were rejected by the community because of the shame they had brought on their family, which meant nobody wanted anything to do with them.

Although staff at PathFinders knew about the shame associated with out-of-wedlock pregnancy in rural Indonesia, they did not know about the depth of the public shaming former DMWs were subjected to. The research Ladegaard brought back to the NGO led to at least two significant changes: first, it instigated changes in PathFinders' educational programme from a focus on skills training with the aim of starting a business to a focus on (mental) health issues, such as resilience and empowerment training (e.g. conflict management, decision making, and parenthood). Thus, a new Home Integration Programme was rolled out in the spring of 2019, and Ladegaard received a Certificate of Appreciation for his contribution to the programme at a reception on 21 June 2019 [1]. Secondly, the research led to increased collaboration between PathFinders and Indonesian migrant worker NGOs in order to explore whether the Hong Kong NGO could be involved in setting up a shelter for migrant mothers and their babies. In 2018 PathFinders decided to support existing work done by Migrant Aid, led by Moch Cholily and his team in Jember, East Java. [1].

The second example of impact comes from the Justice Centre Report, *Coming Clean: Protecting Forced Migrants' Rights*, published in 2016. The aim of the report was to document "the scale of exploitation experienced by the general MDW [migrant domestic worker] population in Hong Kong, and the extent to which this exploitation amounts to forced labour or even human trafficking" (p. 6). Ladegaard was interviewed by Jade Anderson, Head of Research at Justice Centre, and his research was used to support the conclusions in the report. Ladegaard was also interviewed by one of Justice Centre's legal caseworkers to provide evidence to support DMWs' non-refoulement claims, although the number of DMWs benefiting from this work, or the outcome of their cases, cannot be specified for reasons of confidentiality. Altogether, the Justice Centre described Ladegaard's impact on their work as "substantive" [2].

The third type of impact came out of Ladegaard's collaboration with Rooftop Productions, a theatre production company in Hong Kong. Ladegaard was approached by the company in June 2017 because of media interviews about his work, including [5]. Rooftop did extensive interviews with Ladegaard, and they also drew on a copy of his book. Their play, *Not the Maids* [6], had its premiere at Ngau Chi Wan Civic Centre on 12 August 2017, and received very positive reviews in the local media, including the Hong Kong Economic Journal and RTHK Radio [7]. Ladegaard was invited on stage after the premiere to talk about his research and answer questions from the audience. Rooftop used excerpts from the narratives published in Ladegaard 2017a, and they used his analyses as well as interview material in their artistic interpretation of DMWs' lives and experiences. Directors Ivor Houliker and Michelle Li Yuen Jing commented in a letter to Ladegaard that his work was useful to them specifically because it "provided us with first hand accounts of FDHs' [Foreign Domestic Helpers'] suffering and...

allowed us to use authentic examples within the performance” as well as helping the company to “go beyond simply depicting ‘bad’ employers and refocus criticism on a flawed system” [3]. *Not the Maids* was seen by 240 people over three nights and was later nominated in The 10th Hong Kong Theatre Libre in the following categories: Best overall performance, Best script, and Best director [8].

Beyond the impact of the play, Ladegaard’s work has raised awareness and understanding among the general public in Hong Kong. In February 2017, Ladegaard gave an interview to the *South China Morning Post* (circulation around 100,000), which published an in-depth article on the plight of DMWs as a result, quoting Ladegaard verbatim over several paragraphs. Over 25 comments left in response to the online version of the article demonstrate that the research triggered a lively debate; one reader called Ladegaard’s insights “a sad reflection of Hong Kong society that so many choose to ignore” [5]. Ladegaard was also interviewed and extensively quoted by *The Guardian* (March 2017) [9]. *The Hong Kong Free Press* reviewed Ladegaard’s book in March 2018, calling it “a daunting litany of horrible complaints that most people in Hong Kong... routinely ignore” [10].

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Certificate and letter from Pathfinders
2. Letter from Justice Centre Hong Kong
3. Letter from the Directors, Rooftop Productions
4. Cynthia Abdon-Tellez, Director Mission for Migrant Workers
[\[cynthiaabdon@gmail.com\]](mailto:cynthiaabdon@gmail.com)
5. Article from South China Morning Post, 17th February 2017, with reader comments
<https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/families/article/2069843/beaten-hit-iron-doused-bleach-hong-kong-domestic-helpers-facing>
6. <https://rooftopproductions.hk/portfolio/not-the-maids/>
7. <https://rooftopproductions.hk/reviews/>
8. <https://rooftopproductions.hk/news/>
9. The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/mar/10/sunday-sit-in-inside-hong-kong-weekly-domestic-worker-resistance;>
10. Hong Kong Free Press book review: <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/03/04/high-court-ruling-live-rule-guarantees-abuse-hong-kongs-domestic-workers/>