

Mapping Opportunities for Technology Interventions onto the NGO-Migrant Domestic Worker Relationship in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper maps opportunities for technology interventions onto the non-governmental organization (NGO)-migrant domestic worker (MDW) relationship in Hong Kong. Through the lens of communicative ecologies, this paper interrogates the state of NGOs that work with MDWs in Hong Kong's existing engagement with information and communication technologies (ICTs). It finds that technology already supports a powerful discursive layer for MDWs to communicate with one another in Hong Kong outside of NGOs, and that successful interventions on the part of NGOs working with MDWs based in Hong Kong engage with digital platforms that MDWs already use. Subsequently, we identified MDWs' cell phones as platforms for both community care and employer control. Based on this understanding we propose four recommendations for NGOs implementing ICT approaches in their work with MDWs in Hong Kong: 1) collaborate to investigate appropriate data sharing between NGOs, MDWs and Hong Kong government, 2) encourage training for NGOs on government data that is already available 3) ground all ICT interventions in existing communicative ecologies of MDW communities, and 4) increase support for NGO innovation in Hong Kong. Our recommendations and conclusion section further posits to what extent each of these critical recommendations may also apply for NGOs working with MDWs in other destination countries.

1 Introduction

As COVID-19 ravages the global labour market, new estimates by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reveal that of the 72 million migrant domestic workers (MDWs) globally, 55 million (including 37 million women) risk unemployment.¹ Recently in Hong Kong, many MDWs have been suddenly dismissed from work due to employer job loss or departures due to COVID-19. As MDWs' legal right to housing is tied to their employment contracts in Hong Kong, many lack shelter, resources, or the ability to travel to their home countries due to COVID-19. Since January 2020, organizations have reported MDWs acquiring new debts, paying excessive recruitment agency and/or visa fees, struggling with homelessness, and failing to keep themselves and/or their families financially afloat in uncertain times.² COVID-19 exacerbated the precarious nature of labour for Hong Kong's MDWs.

¹ "Livelihoods of More than 55 Million Domestic Workers at Risk Due to COVID-19." *International Labour Organization (ILO)*, 16 June 2020, www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_748093/lang-en/index.htm.

² See: <https://www.scmp.com/yp/report/latest-reports/article/3093567/covid-19-brings-new-challenges-charity-helping-migrant> <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3115290/hong-kongs-domestic-workers-philippines-year-home-christmas-amid> <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3094430/covid-19-making-millions-domestic-workers-more-vulnerable-tech-can>

International surveys of migrant labourers reveal that the most common reason why migrant workers leave their country of origin is to improve their economic opportunities.³ But without the wages, contractual benefits, physical and/or income security that they were initially promised, MDWs can become trapped in socially devalued labour cycles.⁴ Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly being used to improve communication between NGOs and MDWs. Through these tools, organizations can empower workers to dismantle information and power asymmetries within exploitative employer-employee relationships.⁵ Critically, this includes bridging gaps in understanding and enforcing MDWs' legal rights.⁶ To cope with challenges posed by COVID-19 and beyond, there is urgent need to understand how NGOs/civil society/faith-based organizations can better use technology to support MDWs access information or services in Hong Kong.

Through a desk review and interviews with 23 local civil society actors in Hong Kong, this study identifies NGOs perceptions on precarious work for Hong Kong's MDWs and maps gaps and opportunities for technology interventions to support empowerment and access to services. We situate our understanding of the relationships between the civil society sector, employers, and MDWs into the broader communicative ecology⁷ and technology landscape within Hong Kong. In doing so, we identify how MDWs are already using ICTs (including Facebook groups, WhatsApp channels, and video calling) to access services or other forms of support in Hong Kong in addition to those provided in NGOs and civil society organizations.

This paper begins with a brief overview of HK's migration policy and technology landscape. It then presents related work focusing on the use of ICTs by MDWs, based on the conceptual model of a communicative ecology to understand communication between these people and groups. Next, it summarizes the study methodology and discusses key findings from our interviews. Lastly, based upon these findings we propose a set of recommendations for NGOs implementing ICT approaches in their work with MDWs in HK.

2 Overview of Hong Kong's Migration Policy and Technology Landscape

Hong Kong is a major destination for temporary and circular migrant workers within the Southeast Asian region. Migrant workers currently account for approximately 10% of the active labour force in Hong Kong⁸ and are employed predominantly as domestic workers, with approximately 1 in every 3 households with children in Hong Kong employing an MDW⁹. Starting in the early 1970s, Hong Kong changed its immigration policy to allow MDWs to be recruited internationally, to address acute shortages in the local labour market of care services.

³ Hungwei, Chipu. "The Precarious Lives of Zimbabwean Migrant Workers in Johannesburg." *ILERA World Congress 2018*, online.ileraworld.org/abs/files/CS127_AB0055_Chipo_Hungwe_Track_4.pdf.

⁴ Koh, Jah-Hon. "The Continuity of Precarious Status and Intensive Labour: Migrant Domestic Workers Trapped between the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and Permanent Residency in Canada." *ILERA World Congress 2018*, online.ileraworld.org/abs/files/CS127_AB0336_Jah-Hon_Koo_Track_4.pdf.

⁵ See "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Sixth Edition. Updated estimates and analysis". 23/9/20 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_755910.pdf

⁶ Florczak, Izabela, and Marcin Wujczyk. "Precarious Work of Migrant Workers - the Example of Ukrainians in Poland in the Light of Regulations of (R)ESC." *ILERA World Congress 2018*, [online.ileraworld.org/abs/files/Florczak_Wujczyk_paper_Precarious_work_of_migrant_workers_\(1\).pdf](https://online.ileraworld.org/abs/files/Florczak_Wujczyk_paper_Precarious_work_of_migrant_workers_(1).pdf).

⁷ Tacchi, J., Slater, D. and Hearn, G. (2003). *Ethnographic action research*. New Delhi: UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Regional Bureau for Communication and Information).

⁸ Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, "Labour Force, Employment and Unemployment," n.d., <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/scode200.html>.

⁹ Lily Kuo, "How Hong Kong's 'Maid Trade' Is Making Life Worse for Domestic Workers throughout Asia," *Quartz*, 2014, <https://qz.com/176354/how-hong-kong-maid-trade-is-making-life-worse-for-domestic-workers-throughout-asia/>.

Since then, the number of MDWs has increased significantly over time as Hong Kong continued to develop economically. The government has projected that by 2047, the city will need 600,000 MDWs to fill gaps in elderly care and childcare¹⁰. Domestic work is a highly gendered profession, with MDWs in Hong Kong being almost exclusively female and a majority coming from just two countries, the Philippines and Indonesia (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong. Source: Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong

Year	Country of Origin			Total
	Philippines	Indonesia	Others	
2016	189,105	154,073	8,335	351,513
2017	201,090	159,613	8,948	369,651
2018	210,897	165,907	9,271	386,075
2019	219,073	170,828	9,419	399,320
2020	207,402	157,802	8,680	373,884

On one hand, MDWs are afforded numerous protections under Hong Kong’s employment regulations such as having a Standard Employment Contract, a statutory minimum wage, food allowances, and a mandatory rest day. However, on the other hand there are several controversial policies that researchers and activists have linked with systematic vulnerabilities to abuse in terms of personal safety and job security¹¹. Under a policy known as the “two-week rule”, MDWs are required to leave Hong Kong once their contract is completed or within 14 days of premature termination of their employment. This rule limits the ability of MDWs from speaking out against abusive and exploitative conditions, given that if they lose their job their legal immigration status will also be compromised¹². Clause 3 of the Standard Employment Contract outlines the ‘live-in rule’, which mandates that domestic workers are obligated to live inside their employer’s home¹³. Without a clear separation of both physical and psychological space within the household, the boundaries between work and rest become blurred, contributing to MDWs being more prone to excessive working hours, poor living conditions, and greater susceptibility to physical, sexual and verbal abuse¹⁴. Despite the labour protections conferred by the law, widespread accounts of employment malpractices and violence perpetrated against MDWs continue, and they go significantly underreported because of the difficulties in accessing justice¹⁵.

2.1 Hong Kong’s ICT Infrastructure

Hong Kong is a global telecommunications hub that has robust ICT infrastructure and its population, including the women who migrate to become DWs and the NGOs that support

¹⁰ Pathfinders, “Written Submission to HKSAR Legislative Council Panel on Constitutional Affairs,” 2018, <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr17-18/chinese/panels/ca/papers/ca20180521cb2-1391-7-ec.pdf>.

¹¹ Raees Begum Baig and Ching-Wen Chang, “Formal and Informal Social Support Systems for Migrant Domestic Workers,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 64, no. 6 (May 1, 2020): 784–801, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220910251>.

¹² Amnesty International, “Hong Kong SAR: Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women,” 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/4000/asa170522014en.pdf>.

¹³ Hong Kong Immigration Department, “Standard Employment Contract and Terms of Employment for Helpers,” accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/fdhcontractterms.html>.

¹⁴ Hong Kong Justice Center, “Coming Clean: The Prevalence of Forced Labour and Human Trafficking for the Purpose of Forced Labour amongst Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong,” 2016, <http://www.justicecentre.org.hk/framework/uploads/2016/02/Coming-Clean-2016-Justice-Centre-Hong-Kong.pdf>.

¹⁵ Akm Ahsan Ullah, “Abuse and Violence against Foreign Domestic Workers. A Case from Hong Kong,” *Regioninès Studijos* 10, no. 2 (2015): 221–38.

them, can enjoy widespread usage of high-speed internet services and various communications technologies. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), more than 92% of Hong Kong's population have access to the internet and in 2019, Hong Kong had the world's highest number of mobile cellular subscriptions at a rate of 289 per 100 people¹⁶. As part of its smart city development plan, Hong Kong has created more than 36,000 free WIFI hotspots throughout various public areas¹⁷. The Inclusive Internet Index ranks Hong Kong in fifth place overall in the world and 2nd in the dimension of internet availability which examines the quality and breadth of available infrastructure required for access and levels of internet usage¹⁸. The GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index ranks Hong Kong 14th overall worldwide on key indicators of mobile internet adoption¹⁹. More than 80% total public services offered have already been digitized as part of the government's efforts to leverage technology and innovation for streamlined service delivery²⁰. These figures indicate that HK has a strong enabling environment and widespread access for organizations and individuals looking to utilize ICTs.

3 Related Research

We use the conceptual model of a communicative ecology, to analyse the relationships between social, discursive, and ICT interactions. This model enables the researcher to interrogate the “multi-modal communication connections, shaped by particular social and cultural conditions ... [that are used by people to] ... construct knowledge and achieve goals”²¹. The social layer consists of people and groups, distinguishing between social networks, NGOs, communities and legal entities. The discursive layer consists of the content that is discussed, recognising that different groups of people communicate about different topics, mediated by different ICTs. The ICT layer consists of all devices and media that support communication including: no-tech (face to face communication); low-tech (radio and TV); and high-tech (social media and internet)²². To situate this work, this section presents related work on MDWs and NGOs access to ICTs. Our findings in Section 5 will build on this understanding to investigate how these layers support communication related to access to support and services.

Jobs that include cooking, cleaning, and childcare responsibilities with which MDWs are usually tasked are often broadly classified as caring professions. The physical and emotional labour that MDWs experience often transcends a series of completable tasks. This compounds the population's likelihood of becoming systemically devalued as individuals and collective entities, under oppressive social structures.²³ To better account for these nuances, MDW's working conditions should be considered as evolving across a spectrum of forced labour,

¹⁶ World Bank, “Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (per 100 People) - Hong Kong SAR, China,” accessed May 21, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?locations=HK&most_recent_value_desc=true.

¹⁷ https://www.ogcio.gov.hk/en/news/press_releases/2020/01/pr_20200128.html

¹⁸ <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/>

¹⁹ <https://www.mobileconnectivityindex.com/>

²⁰ Jacqueline Kelleher, “Hong Kong's E-Government Strategy: To Make Service Delivery More Efficient and Bring Greater Quality of Life to Citizens,” *OpenGov Asia* (blog), October 27, 2017, <https://opengovasia.com/hong-kongs-e-government-strategy-to-make-service-delivery-more-efficient-and-bring-greater-quality-of-life-to-citizens/>.

²¹ Garrett M. Broad et al., “Understanding Communication Ecologies to Bridge Communication Research and Community Action,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 41, no. 4 (November 1, 2013): 328, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2013.844848>.

²² Hannah Thinyane et al., “Communicative Ecologies and Mobile Phones: Forging a Way to Increased Citizen Engagement” (European Conference on Digital Government Mini Track on Data for Societal Challenges, Lisbon, Portugal, 12-13 June).

²³ M. P. de la Bellacasa, “Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things,” *Soc. Stud. Sci.*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 85–106, Feb. 2011, doi: 10.1177/0306312710380301.

ranging from decent work on one end to overt labour exploitation on the other.²⁴ Studies have shown that ICT technologies can be designed to support the social accountability necessary for the civil society sector to hold states accountable for services provided.²⁵ These tools are best poised to fill existing gaps in NGO's understanding of migrant domestic worker's emerging needs as will be described in Section 3.1,²⁶ particularly during and post COVID-19. When considered as artifacts that, when empathetically designed can rapidly adapt to problems, technology can be uniquely used to improve communication across changing conditions.²⁷

Grounded in an understanding that technology interventions can productively challenge dominant, oppressive structures to promote an ethic of care²⁸ and in existing research on forced labour and communicative ecology frameworks, this study will seek to understand the gaps in care between local NGOs and non-profits operating in Hong Kong's sector and the needs of migrant domestic workers. Existing gaps in designing tech-oriented solutions lie in the negligence of patterns of connection, overlap, and touchpoint support structures that migrant domestic workers and nongovernmental organizations alike are already using.²⁹ We believe that understanding an ethics-of-care framework combined with a communicative ecology framework will lay sufficient theoretical underpinnings for addressing this gap.

3.1 Migrant Domestic Workers and ICTs

Due to the physical isolation MDWs experience in their place of work, many rely heavily on ICTs to access services and information, to maintain social ties and to receive social support. Mobile phones have been described as the single most crucial communication channel for MDWs to be in touch with the world beyond the confines of their employer's home³⁰. Given the increasingly important role technology is playing in their lived experiences, a growing body of research has explored the various ways in which MDWs utilize ICTs. Although research in the context of Hong Kong is limited, several studies have examined the MDW-ICT relationship in Singapore, a city with very similar characteristics in terms of the composition its MDW workforce (primarily Filipina and Indonesian workers) and digital connectivity (ranked very highly in numerous ICT indices and metrics). Kadir and Malik investigated how ICTs enable MDWs in Singapore to take part in "transnational mothering", using the internet to play a role

²⁴ K. Skrivankova, "Between decent work and forced labour: examining the continuum of exploitation," Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, UK, 2010. Accessed: Nov. 01, 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/between-decent-work-and-forced-labour-examining-continuum-exploitation>

²⁵ Grandvoinet, Aslam, and Raha, *Opening the Black Box: The Contextual Drivers of Social Accountability*. The World Bank, 2015.

²⁶ N. Kumar, N. Karusala, A. Ismail, M. Wong-Villacres, and A. Vishwanath, "Engaging Feminist Solidarity for Comparative Research, Design, and Practice," *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, vol. 3, no. CSCW, pp. 22, Nov. 2019, doi: 10.1145/3359269.

²⁷ Dombrowski, L. E. Harmon, and S. Fox, "Social Justice-Oriented Interaction Design: Outlining Key Design Strategies and Commitments," p. 16, 2016.

²⁸ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 3rd ed. Routledge, 2014., and Prins, B. "Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach?," *Eur. J. Womens Stud.*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 277–290, Aug. 2006, doi: 10.1177/1350506806065757.

²⁹ Darbon, D and J. Ferguson, "The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho," *Can. J. Afr. Stud. Rev. Can. Études Afr.*, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 355, 1992, doi: 10.2307/485885. And L. Irani, J. Vertesi, P. Dourish, K. Philip, and R. E. Grinter, "Postcolonial computing: a lens on design and development," in *Proceedings of the 28th international conference on Human factors in computing systems - CHI '10*, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, 2010, p. 1311, doi: 10.1145/1753326.1753522.

³⁰ Elizabeth Frantz, *Breaking the Isolation: Access to Information and Media among Migrant Domestic Workers in Jordan and Lebanon* (Open Society Foundations, 2014), <http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/migrant-workers-information-report-20140223.pdf>.

in child rearing despite not being physical present³¹. Thompson described how mobile phones play a crucial role in building and maintaining a sense of community amongst MDWs³². Platt, et al. find that ICTs are a source of social empowerment for MDWs and allows them to connect globally to a range of information³³. Wahyudi and Allmark provided insights into how Indonesian MDWs in Hong Kong utilize online platforms and mobile technology for performing activism in their community³⁴. These are but a few examples of the many different ways in which MDWs in general, and specifically those in HK, make use of ICTs.

International migrants' usage of digital technologies is significantly impacted by the diffusion and use of ICTs in their respective country of origin³⁵. Research suggests that if MDWs are users of mobile technology prior to migrating, then they are more likely to continue that usage throughout their migration process and once they arrive in their destination³⁶. Given the lack of comprehensive studies on the use of ICTs by MDWs in Hong Kong, drawing on statistics from major countries of origin can offer some insight into patterns of usage. According to reports on global social media use and other digital trends, the Philippines and Indonesia both rank amongst the top five countries globally in terms of daily time spent using the internet via mobile phones (Philippines #1: 5:54 hours per day & Indonesia #4: 5:04 hours per day)³⁷. They also both rank in the top ten countries globally in time spent using social media (Philippines #1: 4:15 hours per day & Indonesia #9: 5:04 hours per day)³⁸. Although there are still persistent digital divides with device access and connectivity, these figures suggest that in general, both groups readily access the internet and social media through mobile phones when available and do so as some of the highest average rates in the world. These digital channels can help to better connect MDWs with one another as well as with service providers, however improved digital literacy and awareness of sources is necessary for them to be used effectively. This is an important consideration for NGOs who are looking to engage with MDWs through online outreach and support services. However, an ILO report on ICT use by female migrant workers notes that:

“For the most part, service providers and stakeholders have fallen short in their digital outreach, failing to harness ICT in a way that can make migration safer and fairer for women. Innovative engagement with the social media networks used by migrant women may be key to effective outreach, since migrant women tend to trust social media.”³⁹

³¹ Shelly Malik and Siti Zubeidah Kadir, “The Use of Mobile Phone and Internet in Transnational Mothering Among Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, December 23, 2011), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1976210>.

³² Eric C. Thompson, “Mobile Phones, Communities and Social Networks among Foreign Workers in Singapore,” *Global Networks* 9, no. 3 (2009): 359–380.

³³ Maria Platt et al., “Migration and Information Communications Technology Use: A Case Study of Indonesian Domestic Workers in Singapore,” 2014, <http://www.solutionexchange-un-gen-gym.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Migration-and-ICT-Use.pdf>.

³⁴ Irfan Wahyudi and Panizza Allmark, “Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong: Smartphone Culture and Activism,” *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan Dan Politik* 33, no. 2 (June 24, 2020): 122–33, <https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.V33I22020.122-133>.

³⁵ Robert W Fairlie et al., “Immigrant Youth and Digital Disparity in California,” 2006, 53.

³⁶ Philippa Smales, “The Power to Organise and Engage: The Use of ICT by Women Migrant Domestic Workers’ Organisations,” Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 2011.

³⁷ WeAreSocial and Hootsuite, “Digital 2021: Global Overview Report,” 2021, <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2021>.

³⁸ WeAreSocial and Hootsuite.

³⁹ ILO, *Mobile Women and Mobile Phones: Women Migrant Workers’ Use of Information and Communication Technologies in ASEAN*, 2019, 5, http://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_732253/lang--en/index.htm.

The experiences of MDWs can differ, and even if they are networked and connected in their home country and go to work in a place with cheap and available internet services, they may still encounter severe digital isolation. Mobile phone use by MDWs is a highly contentious topic amongst employers with many viewing mobile phones as a potentially negative influence that needs to be curtailed⁴⁰. Employers oftentimes partially or completely restrict access to mobile phones and WIFI as general practice or as a ‘punishment’ in response to specific incidents. A survey of employers in Singapore found that than less than 50% allowed domestic workers to access their mobile phones outside of work hours⁴¹. The issue is so widespread that migrant rights campaigns have called for ensuring access to communication as a fundamental right for domestic workers⁴². The 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour underscored both the importance of access to technology and the need for additional considerations for the circumstances of MDWs by issuing the following recommendation:

“Ensure that all migrant workers are accorded the right to information and communication, such as ownership; access; and reasonable usage to mobile phones and other ICT gadgets. More attention should be placed on isolated and vulnerable workers, including increasing connectivity in hard-to-reach places.”⁴³

Increased digitalization can be empowering, but simultaneously runs the risk of further marginalizing and isolating vulnerable members of society who do not have the means to use technology to access services⁴⁴.

Beyond the personal use of ICTs, a range of other technology solutions have been developed by governments, NGOs, and social enterprises to support both MDWs as well as their employers. For example, in Thailand, the Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion has developed a mobile phone app called ‘Smart Domestic Workers’, to deliver information on work permits and labour rights and to provide referrals to help agencies to current and prospective workers⁴⁵. Musaned is an integrated electronic system created by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development in Saudi Arabia to facilitate all relevant procedures for the recruitment of domestic workers⁴⁶. Other platforms use web-based and mobile technology to provide a hiring mechanism that connects domestic workers directly with employers as a way of promoting ethical and transparent recruitment⁴⁷.

3.2 NGO Landscape and Their Technology Use in Hong Kong

As the number of MDWs in Hong Kong has grown over time, so too has the proliferation of NGOs providing services to meet the various needs of this vulnerable population. These NGOs provide a myriad of services tailored towards MDWs such as education and awareness raising,

⁴⁰ Bridget Anderson, *Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid? Working Conditions and Attitudes Experienced by Migrant Domestic Workers in Thailand and Malaysia*, First published (Bangkok, Thailand: ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2016).

⁴¹ ILO, *Mobile Women and Mobile Phones*, 33.

⁴² <https://www.migrant-rights.org/campaign/ensure-access-to-communication-for-domestic-workers/>

⁴³ ASEAN, “Adopted Recommendations of the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour,” Adopted Recommendations (Singapore: ASEAN, October 29, 2018).

⁴⁴ ILO, *Digitalization to Promote Decent Work for Migrant Workers in ASEAN*, 2019.

⁴⁵ ILO.

⁴⁶ Rashid Hassan, “Saudi Arabia’s Musaned Platform Makes e-Visa Easy for Domestic Workers,” Arab News PK, March 6, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1462711/saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁷ See for example: [Helper Library](#); [HelperPlace](#); & [MamaHelpers](#).

financial counselling, legal support, case management, emergency shelter, as well as engaging with activism and organizing protest movements for social change and collective voice.

A 2018 survey commissioned by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service on the IT governance of NGOs found that many NGOs underinvest in technology innovations and devote few resources towards developing IT solutions⁴⁸. Despite the potential for cost reductions and improving service delivery, small NGOs instead focused primarily on the provision of frontline services⁴⁹. Even though Hong Kong has well-developed ICT infrastructure and extensive usage within the private sector, social welfare NGOs appear then to underinvest in their implementation and innovation of ICTs to enhance service delivery, to facilitate outreach and engagement, and to achieve their desired impact⁵⁰. A government commissioned review of ICT strategies for the social welfare sector further recommended that NGOs promote the use of new technologies for more cost-effective service delivery and better communication with service users⁵¹. The Hong Kong Council of Social Service also operates an ICT resource centre to provide technical support and donations of relevant technology products to NGOs and service recipients to expand and improve their use of ICTs⁵².

The ILO notes that effective social protection mechanisms for domestic workers can be facilitated through ICTs⁵³. To date, most research has focused on the interpersonal use of ICTs by MDWs but there has been limited study on how they use ICTs to access services from NGOs and conversely how NGOs serving MDWs leverage ICTs to achieve their objectives. Digital solutions can help support migrants' welfare and protection by facilitating access to services and information including referral to legal services and other forms of social support⁵⁴. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted NGOs to innovate their operations and shift to either entirely remote service provision or some combination of online and offline measures. New technologies such as SMS/text-based systems, online chat functions, chatbots, and other bespoke systems and apps are crucial in supporting women migrant workers who are at risk or subject to violence⁵⁵. Although there is widespread potential, less than a third of mobile internet users in the Asia-Pacific region use their devices to access government and social services online⁵⁶.

⁴⁸ The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, "Survey Report on IT Governance," 2018, <https://governance.hkcss.org.hk/sites/default/files/Survey%20Report%20on%20IT%20Governance.pdf>.

⁴⁹ The Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

⁵⁰ Jin-Wook Choi, "Making ICTs Work: A Study of Hong Kong NGOs in the Social Welfare Sector" (26th International Congress of Administrative Sciences, Seoul, Korea, 2004).

⁵¹ Department of Social Work & Social Administration: The, "Review of the Information Technology (IT) Strategy for the Social Welfare Sector" (Univeristy of Hong Kong, 2012), <https://www.swd.gov.hk/doc/itwelfare/201306/FinalReportEnglish.pdf>.

⁵² https://www.hkcss.org.hk/core-businesses/sector-and-capacity-development/it-resource-centre/?_page=3&lang=en

⁵³ Labour Office, "Social Protection for Domestic Workers: Key Policy Trends and Statistics" (Geneva, 2016), <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/RessourcePDF.action?ressource.ressourceId=53511>.

⁵⁴ Bassina Farbenblum, Laurie Berg, and Angela Kintominas, "Transformative Technology for Migrant Workers: Opportunities, Challenges, and Risks" (New York: Open Society Foundations, 2018), <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/df50370-e15a-4a78-99f9-3954c0e73bb3/transformative-technology-for-migrant-workers-20181107.pdf>.

⁵⁵ UN Women, "Safe Technology for the Provision of Services to Women Migrant Workers at Risk or Subject to Violence," 2021, https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2021/04/ap_safe-and-fair-safe-technology-brief_revised_05042021.pdf?la=en&vs=2907.

⁵⁶ Internet Society, "Mobile Internet Usage Trends in Asia-Pacific," 2016, <https://www.internetsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mobile20Internet20Usage20Trends20in20Asia-Pacific.pdf>.

4 Research Method

This research is framed as a case study, aimed at uncovering the current ways NGOs in Hong Kong use technology to support MDWs and to understand how they perceive technology may help to overcome the challenges they face. Prior to beginning this work, research approval was obtained from the Joint Ethical Review Board of United Nations University (Ref 202009/02). This research employs a qualitative approach, conducting interviews with 23 NGO workers from 14 NGOs between November and December 2020. Depending on the preferences of respondents, these interviews were either conducted one on one with an author, or in groups. The IOM Hong Kong sub-office acted as a mediating agency with stakeholders, introducing researchers to a wide range of stakeholders who support MDWs in Hong Kong.

When meeting with respondents, researchers first explained the purpose of interviews and asked for consent to continue. If consent was given, the researcher led a semi-structured interview, around eight interview questions around the following themes: perspectives on urgent needs facing migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong; current patterns of access to and use of technology; and the types of case-based support that MDW clients were provided. A recording was made of the interview to allow an accurate transcription to be made. A thematic analysis was undertaken using three rounds of inductive coding.

Table 2: Interview participants

Organization Code	Number of Participants	Description
A	2	NGO offering legal and social support to ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, priority focus on MDWs, Affiliated with NGO J
B	4	Organization supporting pregnant MDWs in Hong Kong
C	2	Think Tank / advocacy organization offering a range of programs to end human trafficking and forced labour in Hong Kong
D	1	Organization supporting with MDWs' employers in Hong Kong
E	1	Organization protecting the rights of MDWs and ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong
F	2	Organization working to support the legal rights of migrants in Asia, develops preventative solutions to MDW issues to enlist MDWs in validating their experiences with corrupt employment agencies
G	1	Legal rights and advocacy organization working with marginalized populations in Hong Kong
H	2	Organization working to empower migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong via online training and peer support
I	3	Advocacy organization that works to provide legal support to refugees and migrants in Hong Kong
J	1	Lead volunteer at local community shelter for MDWs affiliated with NGO A, academic researching MDWs in Hong Kong

K	1	Domestic helper agency supporting more ethical hiring of domestic workers in Hong Kong
L	1	Works with other NGOs and social enterprises that work with MDWs to identify their needs and connect them with pro-bono lawyer networks
M	1	Offers financial literacy trainings, support, and resources to MDWs in Hong Kong
N	1	Organization that provides funding and legal support to other organizations

Table 2 provides an overview of the participating NGOs. To anonymise responses, each participating NGO has been assigned a letter, which is used in this document when including direct quotations. The table also indicates how many staff members from each organization participated in the interview and includes a brief description of the mandate of each organization.

The next section presents themes that were uncovered as part of the interview analysis.

5 Findings and Discussion

Our findings revealed multiple discursive examples of both areas for continued social action and advocacy on the part of NGOs to improve the livelihoods MDWs in Hong Kong, revealed discursive layers of MDW's existing communication patterns, and gave our researchers valuable insights into the types of technology-focused solutions that could be designed to improve the livelihoods of MDWs. Our findings are categorised as: 1) those likely to apply only or exclusively to NGOs working with MDWs in Hong Kong and 2) those that might apply to NGOs working with MDWs in any destination country worldwide. In each of the following sub-sections, we highlight where and how ICT interventions might be most effectively designed to intervene in the fabric of existing communicative ecologies between MDWs. We also highlight where findings could be applied across contexts and/or geographies.

5.1 Technology Interventions to Engage in Mediums that MDWs Already Use

Our first finding was the depth of existing communication networks that MDWs used to create and re-enforce their own systems of self-organizing and care in Hong Kong. According to anecdotal evidence presented in our interviews, this seemed to be the strongest and most resilient layer of communication, and one that NGOs used primarily when they required direct, intentional communication with MDWs. All NGO worker respondents insisted that they mainly use Facebook, calling, or text messaging to get in touch with MDWs directly. Many also remarked that YouTube was also a popular method of communication of static content, such as visual examples for evidence or trainings [B4, G1, J2, L1]. It was clear that this discursive layer was used not just used to communicate with peer MDWs in Hong Kong, but also with MDWs' families back home [A1, C1, D1, F2, M1]. A representative from C referenced the difficulties in communicating with MDWs and their families in their countries of origin as psychological and/or physical issues arose in Hong Kong. H used Facebook to keep in touch with alumni of its courses, to strengthen the existing peer-to-peer network of MDWs. B were able to use the digital space of Facebook groups and pages to facilitate links to other types of communities that might serve MDW needs in Hong Kong outside of the NGO sector, including informing them regarding how to elevate complaints to relevant government

agencies. F believe that these more “rudimentary” or basic technology solutions have proven so effective in communicating with MDWs:

This sort of engagement [via Facebook] is a lot less intimidating than downloading an app. [F2]

Other studies have triangulated this finding, indicating that both Facebook and Youtube are extremely popular amongst Filipina and Indonesia MDWs⁵⁷.

Indeed, it appeared from our study findings that MDWs faced an oppressive culture of racism, marginalization, and discrimination inside Hong Kong. This marginalization took diverse forms, from emotional, physical, and financial mistreatment of MDWs from their employers [C2, D1, E1, F2 G1, L1, M1, N1], employment agencies [A1, C1 F2, H1, M1, N1] money lenders [E1, I2, I3, J1, L1, M1], other NGOs [B1, D1, E1], or the Hong Kong government (specifically including racism in courts of law [F1, I2]).

5.2. Cell Phones as Platforms of Both Community Care and Employer Control

NGOs described a MDW’s cell phone as a nexus of both control on the part of their employers and a vessel for care via her community networks. A representative from D, that works specifically with employers of MDWs in Hong Kong described the paradox below:

The phone is a Catch 22. That’s why we did a special class on how to use and not use, because it can really tear down the employment relationship because maybe the migrant worker is on her phone a lot. We want them to have their phone on them, but we don’t want them to be on the phone during work hours socially, so it can be tricky to know when. [D1]

MDWs’ phones provided a mechanism for them to asynchronously communicate with others, allowing them to use whatever time they had available to reach out to networks:

Often we cannot get in touch with them They [MDWs] can’t pause in the workday, there is this expectation that they are available all day. You often see domestic workers walking dogs or children, or at the bus stop, and desperately trying to communicate with their friends, family, their tribe. Not every employer encourages them to chat to their own family while doing their job. They can’t pause and access their family. [G1]

NGOs describe MDWs’ multiple uses of mobile phones: to be nagged by employers [A1, E1, L1, M1, N1], contacted by cherished friends or family [all], used to improve on their work through looking up recipes or maps/locations in Hong Kong [E1, K1, F2, M1], or to serve as a welcome distraction for games, watching videos, and other uses for enjoyment [I1, J1]. Through this discussion it became clear that phones were paradoxically the only connection between MDWs as platforms of care or understanding, and often used as platforms of control by employers.

5.3 NGOs Access to MDW Data

NGOs perceived that they lacked sufficient data to mitigate risks and tell additional stories for MDWs. While many of these additional storytelling pursuits seemed of most critical use to the

⁵⁷ ILO, *Mobile Women and Mobile Phones*, 29.

organization's funders [E1, B3, L1], it became quite clear that specific data could also be used for advocacy, including via channels such as the Departments of Immigration and Labour. When posted to describe issues faced in the workplace, NGOs often emphasized the need for nuanced data. The types of data that were requested by NGOs includes:

- Number of MDWs in Hong Kong grouped by origin country (A1,C3,G1,J1)
- Number of currently and previously detained MDWs (E1, I1, L1)
- Number of MDWs who have lodged complaints of sexual harassment against their employers (B3, I1, L1)
- Number of MDWs who currently have cases that are not yet resolved in court (I1 and L1)

It was unclear whether these discrepancies were because the government did not release data in a timely manner, or whether NGOs were unaware of (or had not used) information request mechanisms. Many NGOs perceived that increased access to data would ensure that their programmes were better designed to serve MDWs communities and to innovate advocacy platforms to improve MDW rights in Hong Kong.

Some NGOs (I and F) stated that they were already exploring creating a publicly accessible data repository that could improve information access for workers:

Something we have been exploring is collecting the data the government can't release to NGOs, how many of the clients have been detained in the past five years, duration of detention, and what are their immigration status, some type of self-reporting and an app, can allow domestic workers to report instances of detention, not having to rely on the government for example, that could be very helpful in helping us collect the info that we are not collecting from the government, like through a survey or something. [I1]

The various opinions on data accessibility is another example of a fragmented information sharing across the sector. Regardless of data visibility, a theme persisted that NGOs were not able to sufficiently organize to change or shape pre-existing data access policies on their own. All NGO respondents also cited a lack of funding as being a barrier to their design of effective programmes; a common claim for NGOs in competitive funding environments work working across the world. Our findings revealed that a deep and intersectional communicative ecology exists for MDWs in Hong Kong, one in which NGOs are already intervening, and one characterized by communities of care grounded in peer-to-peer networks of trust.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study illustrates how MDWs and NGO communities in Hong Kong use social media platforms to support strong discursive layers of communication (Section 5.1). These tools are used by groups to provide much needed care to MDW communities in Hong Kong. NGOs calls for additional funding (Section 5.3) suggest that their underinvestment in technology solutions towards combatting social problems is related to a lack of funding. Despite this, the perceived benefits of these types of interactions appeared to outweigh the costs. NGOs view these existing social media networks as a positive method to engage directly with MDWs, and perceive that they led to deepening trust between a service or care provider and the wider MDW community. This study revealed that NGOs perceive they can use ICTs to make their programmes more effective and provide additional levels of care and support to the MDW community in Hong Kong.

The following four recommendations are designed to support NGOs working with MDWs based in Hong Kong. Each includes a subsequent discussion of how the same recommendation might apply across a variety of contexts that involve NGOs working with MDWs in a variety of destination countries.

6.1 Investigate appropriate data sharing between NGOs, MDWs and Hong Kong Government

One recommendation is for NGOs, MDWs and Hong Kong government to work together to identify the information needs that exist within the community, and to determine the best way to meet these needs. NGO F suggested the creation of a data repository of anonymized employment agency contracts and loan agreements, that could be analysed to identify exploitative practices within the region. As in many countries, illegal recruitment fees often trap MDWs in situations of debt bondage when they enter Hong Kong. There are obvious data privacy and sovereignty concerns that would need to be resolved for this to occur, but a privacy preserving data repository could be a possible tool to address these.

This NGO suggested that big data analytics could be used to identify exploitative practices and patterns, which in turn could be shared with Hong Kong government for an effective policy response.

6.2 Training on available government data

Linked to the first recommendation, this suggests a gap in terms of NGOs awareness of existing data sources. As illustrated in Section 5.3, much of the data that NGOs requested is already available from the Hong Kong Government. This suggests the need for NGOs to be trained on the types of data that is available, and mechanisms that exist to access it.

This recommendation is applicable across a wide variety of geographic contexts, and is not limited to the Hong Kong context.

6.3 Understand communicative ecologies for MDW communities.

While respondents did speak about the potential of apps to benefit MDWs, it became clear that financial and space limitations on MDWs' cell phones meant that downloading additional apps for regular use would be cost and cell-phone-memory prohibitive. Similarly, Section 5.2 detailed how communities of trust could be grounded in ICT solutions that MDWs already use. Social media and mobile phone usage statistics suggest that MDWs would readily take advantage of the strong ICT infrastructure in Hong Kong to facilitate social interaction and access information. Following these broader findings, Facebook, messaging (WhatsApp, WeChat, SMS), and YouTube were identified as specific platforms that could support NGO outreach and communication with MDW communities. Given that many MDWs use these same platforms to communicate with family and friends in their countries of origin, this would enable them to share important information with prospective migrants as well. It is important to note that usage patterns of ICT platforms change over time. NGOs should continue to stay informed as to which platforms are most widely used among MDWs in Hong Kong (and elsewhere) to ensure that their solutions remain effective.

6.4 Increase support for NGO innovation in Hong Kong

NGOs require financial and technical support to innovate to serve their communities. This study has illustrated that ICTs provide NGOs with access to communities that are often excluded or prevented from accessing other support structures (Section 5.2). However, NGOs in Hong Kong have been found to be slow adopters of technology solutions, constrained by limited human and financial resources and expertise. By increasing collaboration between tech-minded actors, funders, MDW communities and NGOs, innovative solutions could be co-designed and developed to meet MDWs changing needs. For example, NGOs could take advantage of existing resources such as the Hong Kong Council of Social Service's ICT resource centre.

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