

Hong Kong's ethnic minorities strive to break down barriers

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Ahtsham Hafiz says language can aid integration. Photo: Dickson Lee

Young people from ethnic minorities in Hong Kong face a constant battle against difficulties in education, especially in learning Chinese, and discrimination in the workplace - as 18-year-old Ahtsham Hafiz is all too aware.

Born to Pakistani parents and raised in Hong Kong, he attended local schools where his classes all comprised ethnic minorities and contact with local Chinese youngsters was minimal.

Hafiz's experience is a common one, as he strives to achieve upward mobility and get to university. "You need Cantonese to communicate with locals and the outside world," he said. "Without it, you cannot upgrade and integrate [into local society]."

Currently a programme worker at an NGO helping other ethnic minority Hongkongers, Hafiz's dream is to return to his studies and become a flight attendant, but he still has to work on his Chinese.

Whether it's education, discrimination or even access to basic services such as public hospitals or police, the language barrier that exists reflects a lack of cultural sensitivity and multicultural mentality within the government, said Maria Tam Siumi, associate professor of anthropology at Chinese University.

"Policies are formed without a multicultural perspective, and within the government, cultural sensitivity and awareness is low," said Tam. "This means ethnic minorities are often left out in the process, and this creates what we call structural discrimination - where their needs are neglected and ignored by the system."

Tam is part of a team from Chinese University who helped analyse data collected from a survey by "snowball sampling" carried out by the New Home Association, an NGO serving new migrants and ethnic minorities.

Of 1,000 respondents, more than 40 per cent were housewives.

But the survey indicated that 90 per cent of interviewees see Hong Kong as home and plan to continue to stay in the city.

"Ethnic minorities have the ability to turn Hong Kong into the truly international metropolitan city it claims to be," said Tam. "Their abilities and talents should be better utilised."

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