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Views

Crossing the Boundary of Language in Building a Harmonious Society

Minority ethnic groups in Hong Kong often suffer from the inability to speak Chinese and are restricted in many aspects of their lives. Some social workers stated there were cases that young children suspected of having special learning needs by teachers were referred to government departments for in-depth evaluation to determine what kind of assistance the students needed ; but the assessment report was only in Chinese or English and parents were unable to seek help in due course as they did not understand the content. Job seekers and working people are often disadvantaged because they do not speak Chinese. Many of them have received education or professional training in their home countries but are denied relevant job opportunities as their academic or professional qualifications are not recognized in Hong Kong. They can only engage in high-risk or low-skilled jobs to earn meager income. The poverty situation of ethnic minority elders in Hong Kong is very serious because they do not understand Chinese. The information on social welfare cannot be delivered to them effectively and thus they lost the opportunity for social security. There have been cases when ethnic minorities apply for public services (such as opening an account at a local bank); they often have to proceed back and forth due to a lack of clear guidelines. What is worse is when the procedures get too complicated that they simply give up and eventually cannot get timely social assistance.

According to a local study on the "Domestic Violence Experiences and Help-seeking Behaviors of Minority Women", recently completed by scholars Tonsing & Tonsing (2017) in collaboration with HKCS, it was found that abused ethnic minority women interviewed would only reveal to family or close friends, and would rarely seek help from local professionals or groups. Even though some women interviewed said that they had sought help from the police, they generally claimed that it was not effective. Another study by Tonsing (2014) also pointed out that language barriers and cultural insensitivities toward ethnic minorities are important factors affecting ethnic minorities in choosing local support services.

From the above examples, it can be seen that language barrier is the main cause for ethnic minorities to encounter hurdles everywhere and thus lose timely support. Because they have no effective way to communicate with the mainstream population, most of them can only stay within their own ethnic groups. In spite of this, they will use their brainy crafts to struggle for survival in the predicament of life, and strive to integrate into the mainstream culture for the development of themselves, their families, and even ethnic groups.



For ethnic minorities in Hong Kong who do not speak Chinese, shopping in the market can be full of obstacles. In order to purchase what they need, they will store photos on their mobile phones, display it to vendors when they want to buy the item. Sometimes they will learn a few Cantonese phrases like: "hou kwai" (very expensive). As mentioned earlier, it is very difficult for ethnic minorities to open a bank account in Hong Kong. Some women set up a savings network with close friends. Each person provides a certain amount of money each month, deposits it in a cash box, and withdraws money after expiration, which works literally as a savings deposit. When members encounter difficulties and have urgent needs, they will take money out for them. There was a Pakistani woman Bibi who has been in Hong Kong for seven years and her daughter, attending K3 in a kindergarten and spoke good Cantonese, was chosen by her teacher to give a speech at the graduation ceremony. In addition to practicing in school, the teacher also gave her a script to practice at home. However, her daughter can only read simple Chinese characters, and Bibi could not read any Chinese. Bibi, therefore, tried every possible means, such as using mobile apps to find out the pronunciation of the Chinese characters, and asking Chinese friends at social welfare institutes for help. The speech was full of her handwriting and her self-created phonics. She may not read Chinese but now can help her daughter to practice at home with those special notes.

HKCS believes that relevant authorities must improve the corresponding services and systems to help ethnic minorities integrate into society. According to a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and the Hong Kong Christian Service's Ethnic Minorities Services (2017), it was found that the third major concern of minority communities in livelihood problems was the difficulty in using public services. The main cause of the difficulty is due to language barriers, the lack of information and lack of cultural sensitivity of front line staff. HKCS recommends that front line officers from the government and the public sector be required to attend courses that promote cultural sensitivity in order to continue to enhance front line officers' effective communication with ethnic minorities on the cognitive, attitude and skills levels. In view of the fact that ethnic minorities in Hong Kong often do not fully and comprehensively grasp the information on mainstream services, in addition to translating service materials into their languages, it is necessary to urge service providers to use translation services within the community. Government departments and public service organisations must provide figures on the use of translation services and the number of people served regularly. It is believed that the establishment of a transparent mechanism will help reduce their isolation and helplessness.

In 2010, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau issued the "Administrative Guidelines on Promotion of Racial Equality" (referred to as the "Guidelines") to provide guidance to relevant policy bureaux and government departments in order to promote racial equality and ensure equal access to social resources and public services for ethnic minorities. However, the "Guidelines" are only voluntary in nature and the Bureau has not been able to effectively coordinate and supervise the implementation of the "Guidelines" in various government departments. In the 2018-19 Budget, it was mentioned that the Chief Secretary for Administration would set up a Steering Committee to coordinate, review and monitor the



support for ethnic minorities. HKCS welcomes the proposal but believes the committee's function should not be limited to co-ordination and supervision; it should also be extended to assist the government in formulating macro and long-term policies to promote racial equality and to build Hong Kong into an inclusive and multicultural society. We hope to see the government expedite further announcements and consultation on the composition, functions, powers, and operations of the committee.

In addition, HKCS realised the needs of ethnic minorities for family services and the service gap. In October 2017, the Jockey Club Family Link: Family Service Centre for Local South Asians was established under the funding of the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust to support South Asian individuals and families living in Yau Tsim Mong and Sham Shui Po districts to help them overcome the difficulties caused by cultural differences and language barriers and to strengthen their confidence and ability to connect with the community. However, we believe the government should take the lead and fully support these special services so that ethnic minorities living in Hong Kong can receive genuine assistance and support.

Many ethnic minorities living in Hong Kong have shown wisdom in working hard to overcome difficulties in their lives. What they need is more than food and cloth, but an opportunity to reflect their thoughts and abilities, and to build a harmonious society together with different ethnic groups.

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