

To truly tackle poverty, Hong Kong must end discrimination against all minorities

The Hong Kong government's HK\$10 billion (US\$1.29 billion) welfare package has garnered mixed feedback, from harsh criticism to hearty praise for trying to tackle the deep-rooted problem of poverty. The fundamental question is: why are certain communities struggling with poverty more than others, and how does discrimination and social exclusion come into play?

Hongkongers living below the poverty line reached a 10-year high of 1.4 million in 2018, and without policy intervention, may rise amid an ageing population and global economic uncertainty. But the fight against poverty is futile if discrimination is sidestepped or remains unresolved.

Denying anyone an equal opportunity to learn, fulfil his or her potential, get a job or develop a career because of gender, disability, race, family responsibility or other qualities is discrimination, which breeds social exclusion – a straight road to economic disempowerment.

Worse, poverty can become a stigma, equated with a lack of talent, initiative or ambition, creating a vicious circle where marginalised communities internalise these labels.

Ethnic minorities, for instance, are disadvantaged by structural problems in the education system, such as the lack of a fully fledged Chinese curriculum for second-language learners or support and training for teachers.

An Equal Opportunities Commission [study](#) earlier this month revealed that, for subjects other than the Chinese language, only 54 per cent of teachers are confident about helping ethnic minority students reach a level comparable with that of their Chinese counterparts. There is also little information on how universities convert test scores in alternative Chinese exams – often taken by ethnic minority students – for use in admissions.

These policy gaps mean ethnic minorities face a disproportionate struggle in accessing tertiary education. The 2016 population by-census shows that the school attendance rate among ethnic minorities aged 18-24 years, excluding foreign domestic workers, is 43.3 per cent, much lower than 52.6 per cent for the overall population. Impoverishment ensues – one in five people of ethnic minority live below the poverty line.

Poverty and exclusion are no less noticeable among people with disabilities. The latest government figures about their employment, from 2013, reveal an unemployment rate of 6.7 per cent, compared to 3.7 per cent for the overall population.

Many employers also balk at the idea of employing people with disabilities, remaining unaware of their different abilities or overanxious about accommodating their needs, when the Social Welfare Department, for example, provides subsidies for employers to retrofit the workplace or buy assistive devices.

This is a loss for people with disabilities as much as for businesses. According to Accenture's survey of 140 American companies from 2015-2018, businesses that seek to employ people with disabilities report 28 per cent higher revenues, twice as much net income and 30 per cent better profit margins than those that do not.

Of equal concern is employer bias against pregnant women and people with family responsibility, such as carers. Last December, the District Court [ruled in favour](#) of a woman represented by the Equal Opportunities Commission, who was pressured to resign from her job because she was pregnant.

From offering disability awareness training for organisations and calling for the statutory right for women to return to their jobs after maternity leave, to launching the [Racial Diversity and Inclusion Charter for Employers](#) and urging an overhaul of ethnic-minority education policy, we work on multiple fronts to promote an inclusive society – not only because it is a basic human right to be free from discrimination, but also because the path out of poverty depends on it.

Social theorist Eli Khamarov said: “Poverty is like punishment for a crime you didn't commit.” This is especially true for marginalised groups who fall victim to social and cultural forces beyond their control. All too often, they are denied a fair chance at imagining a better life, let alone living it.

As we continue to push for systemic change, we appeal to every member of society to express greater empathy for minorities – they are working hard; it is just that they should not have to work harder than everyone else because of who they are.

Ricky CHU Man-kin
Chairperson

Equal Opportunities Commission

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