

Forum Report:

***"Building Bridges –
Challenges and Solutions for Pakistanis in Hong Kong"***

*Organized by **Hong Kong Initiative for Diversity***

May 27, 2025

Executive Summary

The Forum's observations highlight significant challenges faced by individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Hong Kong. Specifically, the Pakistani community experiences disproportionately adverse socioeconomic outcomes, including elevated unemployment rates, diminished earnings, and the highest poverty rate within the city. While factors such as limited proficiency in the Chinese language and lower educational attainment may contribute to these disparities, the Forum participants emphasized the presence of **systemic discrimination** as a primary driver. This systemic discrimination manifests through a confluence of factors, including inadequate educational quality, the prevalence of segregated schooling, and a lack of inclusive policies, ultimately resulting in unequal treatment and restricted opportunities. These challenges are further compounded by deeply ingrained stereotypes and a deficiency in diversity education initiatives within Hong Kong.

The current situation necessitates immediate and comprehensive action from the Hong Kong government. A thorough examination of the challenges faced by diverse ethnic communities in general and Pakistani residents in particular is crucial, alongside **a critical review of existing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies**. To eliminate discrimination and foster equity, Hong Kong must take decisive action. Reform the education system by mandating accredited training for all Chinese-language teachers and implementing a standardized Chinese-as-a-second-language (CSL) curriculum. To combat segregation, actively discourage concentrated enrollment of specific ethnic groups in schools. In the workplace, the civil service should lead by example, targeting 4% representation from underrepresented communities by 2030. Incentivize private sector diversity through tax breaks and recognition programs.

To foster a more inclusive society, Hong Kong should implement a multi-faceted approach. This includes launching strategic public education initiatives to combat stereotypes and promote the diverse contributions of its communities, actively

supporting intercultural programs to bridge interpersonal gaps, and undertaking structural reforms such as establishing a representative council and mandating cultural competency training across key sectors like education and healthcare. By doing so, Hong Kong can cultivate social cohesion, ensure inclusive governance, and become a more harmonious society.

Introduction

On May 27, 2025, the **Hong Kong Initiative for Diversity** hosted a pivotal forum titled "***Building Bridges: Challenges and Solutions for Pakistanis in Hong Kong.***" The event brought together professionals, including social workers, educators, healthcare providers, academics, and entrepreneurs—with whom a great majority were members of the Pakistani community, people from other ethnicities and Chinese in the community. The **Hong Kong Initiative for Diversity** is known for organizing events that promote diversity and inclusion in the region. The forum is an example of the efforts to create a platform for dialogue among different communities.

According to the 2021 **Hong Kong Census**, approximately 25,000 Pakistanis reside in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2021). Compared to the general population, Pakistanis face significant socioeconomic challenges. Data from the Census and Statistics Department (2017 & 2018) indicates that Pakistanis experience disproportionately higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, and the highest poverty rate in the city. These unfavorable conditions may pose systemic challenges in education, employment, and social integration, necessitating focused attention and intervention. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that fosters actionable solutions for a more equitable and inclusive society.

Challenges Faced by Pakistanis in Hong Kong:

Educational Barriers and Language Inequality

Pakistanis and people of diverse ethnic backgrounds¹ in Hong Kong face significant educational challenges, particularly in acquiring Chinese language proficiency. While some attribute these difficulties to the inherent complexity of Cantonese or written Chinese, the fundamental issue stems from **systemic deficiencies** in the education system. A 2021 **Audit Commission Report** uncovered troubling gaps in teacher preparedness: between 2014/15 and 2019/20, 252 out of 988 schools (26%) lacked teachers who had completed the Education Bureau's training on teaching Chinese as a second language. Among the 13,794 teachers responsible for Chinese language instruction, 9,986 (72%) had not received the relevant training. Even more concerning, of the 3,808 teachers who did undergo training, 1,744 (46%) participated in sessions lasting five hours or less - an insufficient duration to develop meaningful teaching competencies. As one forum participant astutely observed, *"There is no failure of learning—only failure of teaching. Teachers must demonstrate professional mastery of Chinese as a second language to effectively support students from diverse ethnic backgrounds."* This statement underscores the professional obligation of educators to provide quality language instruction tailored to the needs of all students.

The challenges extend to higher education as well. While universities in Hong Kong offer Chinese-as-a-second-language (CSL) programs, participation rates remain alarmingly low due to inadequate incentives for teacher involvement (Audit Commission, 2021). Unlike other professions such as driving instruction, which maintains rigorous licensing standards, no comparable requirements exist for CSL teachers. This **systemic oversight** has created a critical shortage of qualified

¹ The term "ethnic minority" has, in some contexts, been considered potentially offensive or marginalizing, as it may imply a sense of "otherness" or exclusion from the mainstream. Throughout this report, neutral and respectful terms such as "people of diverse ethnic backgrounds" and "persons from diverse ethnicity" will be used.

instructors capable of meeting the needs of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The curriculum (framework) itself presents additional barriers. Hong Kong's standard Chinese language program is designed primarily for native speakers, while **no standardized CSL curriculum exists** to guide instruction for non-native learners. This stands in stark contrast to English as a second language education, which has benefited from decades of development with clear frameworks and detailed syllabi. Without equivalent resources for Chinese language instruction, teachers must rely on improvised methods, resulting in inconsistent and often ineffective pedagogy. The consequences are severe: many students from diverse ethnic backgrounds graduate from secondary school with Chinese proficiency equivalent only to Primary Two or Three levels (Lee, 2014), significantly limiting their educational and employment prospects.

Despite the official discontinuation of Hong Kong's "designated schools" policy in 2013/14, **de facto segregation persists** in the education system. During the 2022-23 academic year, 28% of non-Chinese-speaking primary students and 21% of secondary students attended schools where over 80% of their peers shared similar cultural backgrounds (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2023). These racially concentrated environments create substantial obstacles to Chinese language acquisition and meaningful cross-cultural interaction. Research consistently demonstrates the negative academic impacts of school segregation. A study by Kainz and Pan (2014) found that African-American students in segregated schools showed significantly smaller reading gains in first grade compared to their peers in integrated schools. Similar findings were reported by White et al. (2016), who revealed that a 1% increase in the population of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds correlated with measurable decreases in both language (0.19%) and math (0.33%) proficiency. Orfield and Lee (2007), carried out a study on the impacts of high concentration of students from diverse ethnicity on education, concluded: "On average, segregated minority schools are inferior in terms of the quality of their teachers, the character of the curriculum, the level of competition, average test scores, and graduation rates." Taken together, these research results suggest

that the higher the concentration of segregation, the lower the academic performance.

Segregated schools often struggle with significant challenges that compromise the quality of education they offer. In a Hong Kong study, segregated schools frequently experience resource deficiencies, including inadequate infrastructure and insufficient educational materials, which can result in a lower quality of teaching (Shum, Gao, & Ki, 2016). Research indicates that these inadequacies, encompassing lower teacher expectations and a lack of educational services, can severely impede academic performance, further hindering language acquisition, particularly in subjects like Chinese (Gao, 2023). Segregated schools consistently fail to achieve Band 1 status, a benchmark of educational excellence, thereby perpetuating cycles of educational inequality. Students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, linguistically isolated, and attending segregated schools are at risk of "remain[ing] on the periphery of the host society." (Gao, 2023).

Employment Discrimination and Economic Marginalization

People of diverse ethnic backgrounds in Hong Kong face **disproportionate unemployment rates and systemic economic disadvantages**. The 2021 Hong Kong Census reveals a troubling disparity: while the general population's unemployment rate stood at 5.2%, the rate for ethnic diverse communities reached 7.3%. This gap widened dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, with unemployment among ethnic diverse individuals skyrocketing to 50%, compared to just 7.2% among the local population (SCMP, 14/7/2022). This pattern mirrors the "**last hired, first fired**" phenomenon well-documented in labor studies (Cough & Fairlie, 2010), where marginalized groups bear the brunt of economic downturns.

The situation in Hong Kong reflects broader global inequities. Similar to findings in the United Kingdom, ethnic diverse individuals—including Pakistanis--face significantly higher unemployment risks and lower earnings compared to majority populations (Li & Heath, 2020). The consequences extend far beyond economics: unemployment among these communities correlates with increased depression

rates (Huth et al., in press), heightened poverty (Saifuloh, Ahmad, & Suharno, 2019), social exclusion (Fervers, 2018), and negative impacts on children's educational outcomes (Drydak, 2023). These compounding effects underscore the urgent need to address employment barriers facing Pakistanis in Hong Kong.

Ethnic diverse communities experience a 19.4% poverty rate, which is notably higher than Hong Kong's overall poverty rate of 14.7% (Census and Statistics Department, 2018). This data highlights a significant disparity in economic well-being. Furthermore, specific ethnic groups face even more challenging circumstances. For instance, Pakistani families experience particularly high poverty rates, reaching 50.2% (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2016). While language barriers are often cited as a primary obstacle, deeper systemic issues contribute to the economic marginalization of ethnic diverse communities. Even Hong Kong-born individuals with fluency in Cantonese and proficiency in Chinese face limitations. Many are confined to low-wage sectors such as food delivery, construction, and food processing. Even highly qualified professionals encounter--an impenetrable glass ceiling—significant barriers to advancement, as one participant explained, *"Even we speak, read and write (Chinese),...we are suppressed from moving up the ladder and not given equal opportunities to get promoted to higher levels."* This suggests that factors beyond language proficiency, such as **unequal treatment and lack of equal opportunity**, play a crucial role in perpetuating economic inequality.

Institutional discrimination creates invisible barriers that perpetuate inequality between majority and ethnically diverse groups. A bilingual teacher shared a personal experience: *"I am highly qualified and bilingual, yet I am denied promotion to Senior Graduate Master solely because of my ethnicity. How often do you see ethnic minority teachers in school leadership roles?"* This exclusion extends to Hong Kong's civil service, the territory's largest employer. The figures highlight this disparity. Despite comprising 4.1% of the population, ethnically diverse individuals represent only 0.36% of Correctional Services staff, 0.13% of Fire Services personnel, and 0.1% of police officers (Legislative Council, 5/7/2023). This dramatic underrepresentation reveals systemic institutional biases. As one participant pointed out: *"These may be the results of a lack of inclusive policies in Hong Kong. Inclusion is good on paper--a slogan, without much backups."*

Workplace discrimination often takes more subtle forms as well. Many ethnic diverse employees face disrespectful behavior and cultural insensitivity. One participant recounted: *"My supervisor demanded I remove my hijab, claiming it interfered with work. I refused, but such incidents reflect widespread disregard for religious expression."* These experiences highlight Hong Kong's persistent challenges in fostering truly inclusive workplaces that respect cultural and religious diversity.

Social Exclusion and Racial Hostility

Beyond economic marginalization, individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Hong Kong often encounter **profound social isolation** in their everyday experiences. One participant vividly described this reality: *"It felt as though an invisible wall had been built around me—keeping me separate from my colleagues."* This exclusion is evident in various subtle yet hurtful ways, especially within workplace settings that may appear diverse on the surface but **remain unwelcoming**. Many individuals report being systematically excluded from informal social gatherings, as one person recounted: *"When I inquired why I wasn't included, they responded, 'We'll invite you next time.' However, 'next time' never comes."*

Workplace discrimination extends beyond social exclusion, manifesting as active marginalization. Several individuals reported being unjustly held accountable for workplace errors they did not make, fostering a hostile environment that impedes basic professional performance. As one participant stated, *"It feels like others are ganging up against me."* These experiences not only diminish productivity but also undermine fundamental human dignity in the workplace. The combined impact transforms typical professional settings into sources of daily psychological stress for individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Public spaces offer little refuge from discrimination. People of diverse ethnic backgrounds routinely face racial slurs like "Ah Cha" and experience overt avoidance on public transportation. The forum revealed particularly troubling patterns of racial profiling: 80% of male attendees from diverse ethnic backgrounds

reported being subjected to police stop-and-search procedures, while white individuals (companions in the same groups) were not subjected to the search. Studies have shown that such experiences are not isolated incidents but are part of a broader pattern of systemic prejudice faced by ethnic minorities in Hong Kong (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2016). These daily experiences of differential treatment paint a clear picture of the systemic prejudice and social hardships endured by Hong Kong's ethnically diverse populations.

Forum participants have identified **deep-seated stereotypes and inadequate diversity education** as fundamental causes of persistent discrimination in Hong Kong. Despite racial discrimination being illegal in Hong Kong, legislative prohibition alone has proven insufficient to eradicate prejudicial attitudes. *"Respect for cultural diversity is never taught in Hong Kong's schools,"* noted one observer, highlighting a critical gap in the education system. This observation is supported by a research study that has pointed out the lack of diversity education in Hong Kong's curriculum (Lam, 2022).

This systemic failure is exacerbated by media portrayals that routinely depict South Asians as criminals (e.g., "南亞裔刀手" or "South Asian knifemen"), implicitly associating entire communities with triad activity. For instance, news articles from Hong Kong01 (7/3/2024), Oriental Daily (30/3/2023), and Sing Tao Daily (30/6/2024) have been cited as examples of such portrayals. Such reductive representations reinforce harmful stereotypes and perpetuate stigma against people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. These stereotypes have tangible consequences, fostering social exclusion and creating hostile environments for people from diverse ethnicity. While educators could play a crucial role in challenging these narratives by encouraging critical media literacy, schools consistently fail to promote positive representations of ethnic diversity. The resulting climate of alienation leaves many feeling that **Hong Kong society remains fundamentally unfriendly**--if not openly hostile--toward non-ethnic Chinese residents.

Proposed Solutions

The current situation necessitates immediate and comprehensive action from the Hong Kong government. A thorough examination of the challenges faced by diverse ethnic communities in general and Pakistani residents in particular is crucial, alongside a critical review of existing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. Without a proactive, top-down approach that initiates meaningful policy changes, the underlying grievances and potential conflicts within these communities will likely persist, if not intensify. This approach should be coupled with serious consideration of the following solutions.

1. Education Reform

A comprehensive overhaul of Hong Kong's education system must prioritize equitable access to quality instruction. First, the government should **mandate accredited training** for all Chinese-language teachers and develop a **standardized Chinese-as-a-second-language (CSL) curriculum** to address current linguistic disparities. The Education Bureau should take proactive steps to transform schools into inclusive environments by implementing multicultural curricula that foster respect, acceptance, and collaboration among all students.

To combat systemic segregation, policies should actively discourage high concentrations of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds in particular institutions, instead promoting balanced distribution across schools. Top-tier (Band 1) schools should receive specific incentives to enroll and support students from these communities, ensuring diversity becomes an institutional priority rather than an afterthought.

2. Workplace Equity

The Hong Kong government must enact comprehensive policies to guarantee equitable employment opportunities and career advancement for individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. As the territory's largest employer, the civil service should demonstrate leadership by establishing concrete diversity targets, specifically **aiming for 4% representation from historically underrepresented communities** by 2030. This target should be regularly reviewed and adjusted based on demographic shifts and progress made.

Private sector involvement is equally crucial. The government should introduce **tax incentives and establish recognition programs**, such as an "Inclusive Employers Award," to motivate companies to implement meaningful diversity initiatives, particularly within leadership and management roles. Furthermore, to ensure accountability, all organizations exceeding a specified size should be mandated to publish annual workforce demographic reports, with a specific focus on ethnic representation in decision-making positions. These transparency measures will facilitate the tracking of progress toward genuine workplace equity and allow for the identification of areas needing further attention. Regular audits and independent evaluations of these reports will be essential to ensure data accuracy and prevent manipulation.

3. Social Integration Initiatives

Hong Kong must proactively cultivate social cohesion through strategic public education initiatives. Programs like the proposed **"Respect over Prejudice"** campaign should actively combat stereotypes and celebrate the diverse contributions of all communities within the city. These efforts should underscore that social integration is a shared responsibility, with all residents, including Chinese residents, playing a crucial role in fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment. This approach necessitates a commitment to open dialogue, mutual understanding, and the dismantling of barriers that hinder social harmony.

The media plays a crucial role in fostering inclusivity and should commit to representing individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds in accurate and nuanced ways, moving beyond stereotypes and tokenism. To dismantle interpersonal barriers, the government should actively support and expand intercultural initiatives. Beyond traditional "Global Village" festivals, consider funding community-led projects, such as collaborative art workshops, storytelling sessions, and language exchange programs, to encourage sustained interaction and mutual learning. Practical accommodations are essential. In addition to providing halal-friendly options and prayer spaces in public venues, the government should work with businesses to promote culturally sensitive customer service training and ensure multilingual signage is readily available. Furthermore, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) should be empowered with increased resources and proactive investigative powers to effectively enforce anti-discrimination laws. This includes conducting regular audits of workplaces and public spaces to identify and address discriminatory practices, as well as providing accessible channels for reporting and resolving complaints.

4. Enhancing Inclusive Governance

To institutionalize inclusive governance, structural reforms are essential. One key step involves establishing a representative body, such as a "**Pakistani-Hong Kong Community Council**," to serve as an official platform for diverse voices in policymaking processes. This council should possess clearly defined authority to influence decisions impacting various ethnic communities, ensuring their perspectives are integrated into policy development. This approach fosters a more participatory and equitable governance structure.

Complementing this, **mandatory cultural competency training** should be implemented across key sectors, particularly education, healthcare, and human resources. This training aims to cultivate more inclusive professional environments. Such training programs should cover topics such as cultural sensitivity, understanding implicit biases, and effective cross-cultural communication. This will

help professionals better serve diverse populations and create a more welcoming atmosphere for all.

These parallel measures—the establishment of a representative council and the implementation of cultural competency training—would create both top-down policy changes and grassroots cultural shifts. This dual approach establishes comprehensive pathways toward genuine social inclusion, fostering a more cohesive and equitable society.

Conclusion

The forum's findings highlight that while Hong Kong's diversity is a key asset, systemic barriers disproportionately affect Pakistani residents, mirroring challenges faced by other ethnic groups. The report emphasizes that immediate, concrete action is crucial to **dismantle systemic discrimination and foster genuine inclusivity**. This requires **aggressive advocacy for equal treatment and opportunities** through education reforms, enhanced educational quality, desegregated learning environments, and inclusive policies. Only by achieving these goals can Hong Kong create a society where all residents, regardless of their background, can thrive. The forum underscored that inclusivity is not merely a moral imperative but is also vital for Hong Kong's future prosperity

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