

COVID-19 pandemic and disadvantaged ethnic minority communities in Hong Kong: How to promote culturally appropriate practice?

Professor Gizem Arat

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Lingnan University

Social workers have been providing services for ethnic minorities from disadvantaged populations during COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong and beyond. Social workers are important stakeholders to understand how to promote culturally sensitive COVID-19 practice where ethnic minorities (mostly South/east Asians, asylum seekers/refugees, foreign domestic workers) are reported to expose to increasing perceived discrimination during pandemic in Hong Kong. Until now, most empirical studies or social media provided a surface level introduction to the difficulties faced by ethnic minorities or social service providers without any concrete or tangible solutions during COVID-19 pandemic. Many social workers from different non-governmental organisations have raised their concern, however, outlet media generally triggers the negative labelling of ethnic minorities as “lazy, covid-19 spreader”. Our small-scale study on exploring social service providers’ views on how to contain COVID-19 cases using culturally appropriate practice implications embracing ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. We interviewed 15 social service providers from diverse ethnic backgrounds closely working with ethnic minority groups (South and Southeast Asian groups from low-income households, foreign domestic workers, and asylum seekers/refugees) during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong. Based on our participants’ sharing, we found that there is a: 1) lacking mental health support for diverse ethnic minority groups, 2) lacking efforts on the elimination of perceived discrimination, 3) existing language barrier across diverse services, 4) lacking channels to disseminate accurate information, 5) need for an advanced technology, and 6) lacking appropriate surgical mask size for some ethnic minority individuals. Our study yielded that appropriate surgical mask size is lacking for some ethnic minorities in Hong Kong based on our participants’ sharing. Existing international literature have pointed out that usage of surgical face masks makes it difficult for adults with hearing loss to communicate or understand speech. Additionally, other studies have found that face masks could muffle sounds or cover facial experiences that could also interrupt daily social interactions. Future studies could tackle this and propose practical solutions for ethnic minorities and social workers (as one of the key stakeholders during COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong and beyond. Let’s collaborate together and fight against COVID-19 pandemic!