

COVID-19 and underprivileged ethnic communities in Hong Kong: What about asylum seekers/refugees?

Professor Gizem Arat, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Policy

COVID-19 is a significant concern worldwide. Many NGOs serving ethnic minority communities (e.g., disadvantaged South Asians, Southeast Asians) shared their concern that some ethnic groups may not receive accurate information on the prevention strategies of COVID-19 due to language barriers (e.g., limited Chinese or English proficiency) or limited access to Internet facilities, although access to information seems to be eased recently for diverse ethnic groups by the collaboration between Hong Kong government and other stakeholders. However, little attention is given to asylum seekers/refugees. Generally speaking, we have little statistical information about this group which make it difficult to understand their needs and protective mechanisms to empower them against COVID-19. Recently, it is announced that asylum seekers/refugees can freely get vaccinated in Hong Kong which a solid step for the prevention of COVID-19. We still need to pay attention to different ethnic groups' needs in this very small population although they are generally stereotyped as relying only *on government or social benefits*. Asylum seekers/refugees do not choose to live their country of origin. They are forced to leave their home, routines due to on-going severe circumstances, e.g., civil war. And many of them do not know anything about their future. How long will they reside in Hong Kong? What kind of future is waiting for them? Uncertainty makes it really hard for them to feel the part of the community, whether it is temporary or for a longer term of stay. As a Hong Kong society, we need to consider them to meet their basic needs and receive more information on a regular basis of different topics limited to COVID-19.

All in all, we should never forget that not only Hong Kong government has the primary responsibility for the construction of a tolerant, harmonious, and multicultural society for all but also as a citizen of this international city, we all have responsibilities to collaborate with the government. In times of COVID-19, it is especially important that key stakeholders (e.g., leaders in diverse asylum seekers/refugee communities) remains proactive in its exercise of care of this disadvantaged group. It is the Hong Kong, which has the financial and human resources to affect long-lasting changes in a multicultural society. There is an onus on the citizens, NGOs, policy makers, scholars, researchers to acquire a deeper knowledge, a clearer understanding, of issues related limited access to health care and COVID-19 breakdown, for asylum seekers/refugees. Hong Kong has a deeper culture of mutual tolerance and harmony, let's keep this spirit up!