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Hong Kong's 'Embarrassing' Racial Attitudes



AFP/Getty Images

A foreign domestic helper reads a newspaper showing a report on the rights of immigrant workers as she sits beneath the HSBC building in the Central district of Hong Kong on October 2, 2011.

Hong Kong likes to bill itself as “Asia’s world city,” but many of its Chinese residents aren’t exactly tolerant about other races, says a newly released poll.

The survey was conducted over the past five years among mostly police officers in training and secondary school students, finding they hold less than favorable views of those with darker skin. Among the 1,860 surveyed, less than half would feel comfortable having Africans, Nepalese, Filipinos, Indians and Pakistani in their personal lives, for example as friends or spouses.

“It’s embarrassing,” says Fermi Wong, executive director of Unison and a former social worker. “You hope things get better, but this is very sad,” she says.

To be sure, Hong Kong has been making efforts to address the issue, passing a race discrimination ordinance in 2008. Before then, the government kept arguing that “Hong Kong was a harmonious society, that any perceptions of discrimination were just misunderstandings,” says Kelley Loper, law professor at Hong Kong University. She adds that the results of Unison’s survey aren’t surprising, given the government’s past

reluctance to address the issue. She also notes that the ordinance remains limited in its protections.

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Most of Hong Kong’s 300,000 foreign domestic helpers are Filipino and Indonesian in origin. Unlike other foreigners, who are granted permanent residency if they remain for seven years in Hong Kong, domestic helpers have previously been refused such rights, an issue that’s currently being [fought](#) out in court.

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The nonprofit that conducted the poll is careful to note that its results don't represent Hong Kong as a whole, with police cadets making up 54% of respondents and secondary school students 27%. Over 99% of those participating in the survey were ethnic Chinese, over 75% of them were male, and the average age was 24.

The Hong Kong police force said officers are provided with “incessant training” to “equip them with the knowledge and skills in carrying out their duties as well as providing services in a fair and impartial manner.”

Surveys conducted in Hong Kong's rival, Singapore, tell a different story, suggesting that young people there hold comparatively more tolerant views towards race. According to government surveys, 90% of respondents in Singapore aged 15-34 say they would feel comfortable having a neighbor or colleague of a different ethnicity. (However, that figure dips to 80% if the neighbor in question is also a foreigner.)

Back in Hong Kong, Unison's poll also found that some Hong Kong residents distrust mainlanders, said Ms. Wong, with only 85% saying they would accept having Chinese in their neighborhood, compared to 93% approval for Japanese and 89% for Americans.

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