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Hong Kong needs to confront its problem with racism



by **HONG KONG UNISON** < [HTTPS://HONGKONGFP.COM/AUTHOR/UNISONHK/](https://hongkongfp.com/author/unisonhk/) >
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By Phyllis Cheung and Puja Kapai

The death of George Floyd has triggered nationwide anger against racism and sparked protests across the US. As the reaction spilt over the borders in a global outpouring of outrage, Floyd's death has reverberated across the world and led people of all colours to stand in solidarity with the unprecedented anti-racist movement in the US.

This is not only because people are horrified at a white policeman's handling of an unarmed Floyd but because his death opened a fresh wound in a scar that runs deep and bleeds the names of a long list of men and women of African-American descent, subjected to horrific police brutality which resulted in their untimely deaths.



A demonstration in Hong Kong protesting against racism. Photo: Tom Grundy/HKFP.

Floyd's death is symptomatic of long-standing systemic and racial injustices entrenched in America's deep-rooted history of oppression. It is one characterised by the control and policing of Black bodies through slavery, exploitation and other forms of subjugation perpetrated by White people. Despite the advances of the Civil Rights Movement, we continue to live in the past and are witnessing its perpetual reach and effects as the tentacles of white supremacy continue to chokehold people of colour.

The urgency with which the “pandemic of racism” needs to be eradicated globally is only too apparent in the disproportionate number of deaths of Black people from Covid-19, occurring at nearly three times the rate of White people in America. Meanwhile, Black, Caribbean and Asian communities in the UK are dying at twice the rate of White Britons.

White supremacy and entrenched racism are not a distinctly American reality. Rather, racism and the structures through which it is sustained and perpetuated are propped up by global infrastructures of oppression and exploitation. The outpouring of rage we are witnessing the world over is a testament to the reality that such brutality persists in all countries, from America to Britain to India, China, Australia and New Zealand and everywhere else in between.

This includes Hong Kong. We must not remain passive bystanders to such oppression. Those in positions of power must recognise that such systemic

and racialised hierarchies of power and its callous abuse will no longer be tolerated.



Equal Opportunities Commission. Photo: Karen Cheung/HKFP.

For many ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, the painful realities of everyday racism, faced in all spheres of life, are only too familiar. Those who want to seek redress remain defeated by a system which entrenches racial inequality, even within the law, since our Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) fails to cover the exercise of government functions and powers. This is a realm in which ethnic minorities remain only too vulnerable to discrimination and its many ills, in key domains such as policing, immigration, detention and correctional services and the like.

The case of *Singh v Secretary for Justice* (2011) – the only case brought under the RDO that sought to hold the police accountable for racial discrimination – is a painful reminder of how vulnerable ethnic minorities are to abuse of power. Mr Singh, then only an 11- year old child, who himself was a victim of an altercation at the MTR station when he ran into a Chinese woman, became a suspect when he was wrongfully arrested and detained after he sought police assistance. He was told that he would be charged with assault and was made to wait for an interpreter, even though he spoke English fluently and was not as fluent in any other language. The judgement, handed down in 2016, found that since police actions did not

amount to the provision of a “service,” they were not covered under the RDO.

This is not the first time a member of the ethnic minority community has found themselves on the wrong side of the law, which, in the case of Singh, was particularly egregious given he was just a child and should never have been threatened with a charge given the circumstances.

However, as research on unconscious bias has long demonstrated, racial (and other) stereotypes (based on class, gender, sexuality, etc.) are deeply entrenched and these snap judgements, when left unchecked, play a fundamental role in our day-to-day decisions and have life-altering consequences.

We have witnessed first-hand the detrimental impact racial biases can have in the course of policing for ethnic minorities. Marred by racial biases and prejudices operative at the subconscious level, instinctive actions can have tragic consequences in the split-second decision-making often required in such circumstances.



Hong Kong police. Photo: May James/HKFP.

Most Hongkongers probably do not remember Mr Dil Bahadur Limbu, a Nepalese man who was shot to death by a lone policeman on Ho Man Tin hillside in 2009. Subsequently, thousands marched to the streets demanding justice. The policeman maintained that he fired in self-defence after failing to subdue the homeless Mr Limbu, who allegedly held up a wooden chair despite being asked to furnish his identity documents repeatedly.

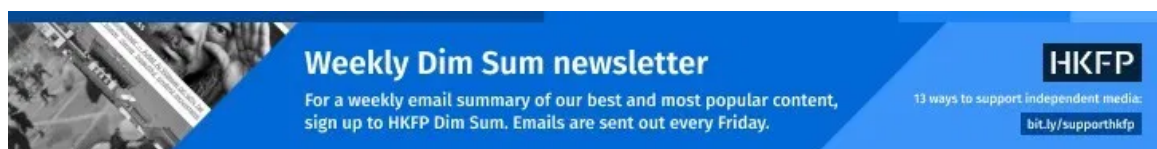
The officer said he feared his life was in danger despite Mr Limbu being unarmed and unable to understand the policeman's instructions, which were issued in Cantonese. The officer was eventually acquitted of unlawful killing. What prompted him to shoot in the heat of the moment and to deliver a fatal shot? From the outset, police have directed the narrative around Mr Limbu, stating that he was an "unemployed, homeless, dark-skinned foreigner with criminal convictions."

In May, an ethnic minority man of Indian descent **[died in police custody](https://hongkongfp.com/2020/05/13/man-dies-after-police-arrest-raising-concerns-over-treatment/)** **[< https://hongkongfp.com/2020/05/13/man-dies-after-police-arrest-raising-concerns-over-treatment/>](https://hongkongfp.com/2020/05/13/man-dies-after-police-arrest-raising-concerns-over-treatment/)**. The full facts of the incident, arrest and death have yet to emerge. Nonetheless, the silence over the deaths of people of colour and their routine over-policing in Hong Kong is deafening.

Hong Kong has seen its share of disproportionate policing, with ethnic minorities being the group most likely to be stopped and searched routinely, particularly those who appear to be of South Asian or African descent.

"South Asians" are also all too often overrepresented in mainstream media reports about crimes where the ethnicity of the suspect is routinely highlighted when the suspect is non-Chinese, although there is no evidence that ethnic minorities are more likely to commit crimes compared to other members of the general population. These overt and implicit forms of biases have roots in the normalisation of everyday racism and brutality.

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Hong Kong Unison is a charity and NGO which advocates for policy reforms for Hong Kong's ethnic minority residents. It receives no government funding and aims to promote racial equality in the city.

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TOPSHOT - A couple hugs and cries near a makeshift memorial to George Floyd ... [see more](#)

AFP | KEREM YUCEL

In his emotional eulogy at Floyd’s memorial service, Reverend Al Sharpton said: “What happened to Floyd happens every day in this country, in education, in health services and in every area of American life. It’s time for us to stand up in George’s name and say: get your knee off our necks.”

Standing up and speaking out against racial oppression and violence is not a question of standing “with us” or “with them.” It is to stand strong against the infrastructures of oppression that have long trampled on the equal rights of fellow human beings.

This is the moment to begin confronting the overt and covert racism that is widespread in our own society here in Hong Kong. Let us stand in solidarity against such violence and speak out loudly against this system, which is sustained by our silence.

Phyllis Cheung is the executive director of Hong Kong Unison. Puja Kapai is an associate law professor at the University of Hong Kong and author of “Unconscious Bias and Implications of Equality in Hong Kong and Asia.”