

# Global Compact Migration Review: Youth Consultations

## HONG KONG & CHINA Report

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## Introduction

With a relatively open immigration policy, Hong Kong has long been a popular destination country for migrants from across the globe. Migrant workers play a particularly crucial role in the Hong Kong economy, with foreign domestic helpers comprising nearly 5% of the total Hong Kong population as of 2020. 55% and 42% of foreign domestic helpers come from the Philippines and Indonesia, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the long history of migration to Hong Kong, migrants still face considerable challenges relating to access to basic social services and discrimination in both public and private spheres. These factors make the migrant population particularly vulnerable to social and economic challenges, particularly amongst youth migrants. For example, child poverty rates amongst Hong Kong's immigrant population rose from 18% in 1981 to 38% in 2001. These social and economic disparities have become even more obvious since the start of the global pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Migration on mainland China, by comparison, still consists largely of rural to urban migrants—approximately 286 million in 2020<sup>3</sup>. This has been steadily increasing, with migrant workers accounting for more than 20% of the total population in 2019<sup>4</sup>. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in average monthly incomes of migrant workers, but unemployment rates remain higher than the national average. Further, the families left behind of these rural-urban migrant workers still remain privy to an income disparity, with average rural households still earning approximately 1/3 the average urban household. China has seen some immigration of displaced migrants, notably irregular migrants crossing the China-North Korea border. The State views the latter as 'illegal economic migrants' and repatriates many of these, but some of these migrants successfully seek sanctuary in 'international' spaces such as diplomatic compounds and international schools, and are allowed to migrate further to South Korea<sup>5</sup>. There is also a notable community of African migrants, concentrated predominantly in Guangzhou Province, who have migrated for business and trade reasons<sup>6</sup>.

The United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UN MGCY) GCM Team for Greater China conducted a series of consultations with a specific focus on the Hong Kong region. Consultations involved organizations that serve children of migrants, young migrant workers, and youth refugees and also involved individuals who are migrant workers and refugees themselves. Specifically in China, the team faced barriers to access organisations operating in the Mainland, but a consultation was conducted with a large grassroots organisation providing education for migrant children, as well as left behind children of

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<sup>1</sup> Data.gov.hk, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Social Indicators Research, 2014

<sup>3</sup> C. Textor, Statista, 2021

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> I. Jeffries, North Korea: A Guide to Economic and Political Developments, 2013

<sup>6</sup> B. Schiller, Big Trouble in China's Chocolate City, 2010

migrants. The consultations sought to reveal their perspectives and insights related to the following GCM objectives:

- **Objective 2:** Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin.
- **Objective 15:** Provide access to basic services for migrants.
- **Objective 17:** Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration.
- **Objective 18:** Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competences

## Overall Themes and Key Recommendations

One of the key recurring themes mentioned throughout consultations was the impact of discrimination on the daily lives of migrants in Hong Kong. Individuals and organizations discussed the psychosocial impacts of race-based discrimination, and the significant impacts that discrimination has on migrants' ability to secure stable employment, access educational opportunities, find suitable housing, and access a host of other basic services and necessities.

One organization recounted their experiences helping South Asian migrants navigate the process of finding an apartment, and described the rampant discrimination they would face when speaking with landlords and real estate agents. It is not uncommon for landlords to explicitly state that they would not allow for any renters of South Asian descent. This not only makes it difficult for migrants to find affordable housing in an already exorbitantly expensive real estate market, but has lasting mental and emotional impact as well.

Another organization discussed the necessity of serving as liaisons between students and school administrators after repeated incidents of teachers making explicitly racist remarks about a migrant child in front of classmates. In these cases, it is common to receive a perfunctory apology from the school but no substantive reprimand or plan for systemic change.

Furthermore, a youth refugee expressed his frustration toward the job search process. Despite his fluent English skills and university education, he would rarely get called for an interview because the name shown on his CV was neither Chinese nor Western. Even when he was lucky enough to secure a job interview, he felt that prospective employers viewed him with doubt and mistrust.

Another key concern is the impact of barriers to education on migrant children. In Hong Kong, migrant children are not only affected by discrimination but also lack of affordable, state-provided language

support for Mandarin and/or Cantonese as second languages. As these are primary languages of instruction in many local schools, this leads to high dropout rates. Similarly, migrant children in China face barriers to further education past primary school, which have not benefited from government reforms to migrant schools.

**Youth call on the government to expand protections against race-based discrimination.** Although Hong Kong has existing discrimination laws, there seems to be a significant gap in the enforcement of these laws. Discrimination against migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities are still commonplace, and rarely do perpetrators of discrimination fear any meaningful consequences.

**Youth call on the government to provide more channels for feedback and reporting of discriminatory practices.** The government could consider hotlines and online resources in which individuals can file complaints when they feel they have been the victim of treatment that violates anti-discrimination ordinances.

**Youth call on the government to improve public awareness of migrant rights, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.** While there are existing laws that are meant to protect individuals against discriminatory practices, not everyone, and particularly migrants, are fully aware of their legal rights.

**Youth call on the Ministry of Education and state-sanctioned education boards to implement policies and programmes ensuring language, curricula, and social-integration support in schools** for young migrants, as well as to invest in quality resources for migrant schools.

## Objective 2: Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin.

Hong Kong is host to many migrants who either struggle to find employment in their home countries, or can receive higher wages by working in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government has policies that facilitate this migration, as the country has experienced significant economic benefits from the cheap labor provided by migrant workers. Therefore, working with other governments to reduce migration rates does not seem to have been a policy focus.

However, there have been efforts amongst young individuals and youth-led organizations to bring greater awareness to drivers of migration and create forums for which these topics can be discussed.

### **Key Initiatives & Projects**

- Youth-led educational events that explain the social and economic drivers for outbound migration across various regions.
- NGOs holding open forum discussions about the history of migration to Hong Kong.
- Youth-led publications covering stories of migrants' and their journey moving to Hong Kong.

### **Key Recommendations**

**Youth call on the government to improve public awareness of migration issues and dispel misinformation around migrants and the history of migration in Hong Kong.** This includes integrating the rich history of migration in Hong Kong into the local school, including early migrants to Hong Kong from mainland China, and drawing similarities between those early Chinese migrants and present-day Chinese and non-chinese migrants.

## **Objective 15: Provide Access to Basic Services for Migrants**

With the onset of the global pandemic, already important resources of social services and financial assistance programs have become even more critical for many migrants in the region. For example, in response to the economic impact of COVID-19, the Hong Kong government provided a \$10,000 HKD cash handouts to low-income migrants – in addition to existing rental and food subsidies provided to refugees and asylum seekers. This demonstrates a governmental and public recognition of the necessity of these services for the migrant community.

Despite these services from governmental and private organizations alike, consultations revealed concerns around the following: a lack of awareness of these programs, a lack of accessibility, and potential legal risks associated with accessing these services.

In China, migrant children's access to education remains an issue. Despite well-received and beneficiary government upgrades to migrant schools, opportunities for migrant children in urban centres to progress beyond primary school education remains significantly limited. This often causes migrant children to return to their rural hometowns, subjecting them to separation from their parents and further social inequalities.

It was also noted that new policies by the Chinese government on eligibility to become urban migrant workers have, whilst contributing towards lessening discrimination towards rural-urban migrants, also

added barriers to accessing essential social services for existing migrants who do not meet these socio-economic background criteria.

### **Key Initiatives & Projects**

- Distribution of free COVID tests at migrant-focused community centers and clinics.
- Youth initiatives to translate written public health announcements and offer in-person translation services to aid in COVID-related information dissemination.
- Youth volunteer tutors and after-school programs focused on migrant and ethnic minority children.
- Pro-bono legal services for foreign domestic workers and refugees.
- Provision of educational services, such as English and digital literacy, to migrant and disadvantaged children, including children of migrants, both within main cities in China as well as in rural areas.

### **Key Recommendations**

**Youth call on the government to improve general awareness of available social services amongst migrant communities by ensuring that information is disseminated via relevant channels, translated in key languages, and appropriately contextualized.** These services are usually not publicized and explained in languages other than English and Chinese, resulting in information delays and information gaps for migrant communities.

**Youth call on the government to improve access to social services and subsidy programs.** Certain services remain inaccessible to refugees and asylum seekers due to fears of violating the Hong Kong immigration ordinance and legislation. For example, there exists an education reimbursement program for refugees but parents are required to pay the fee first before receiving reimbursement. Payment of the fee would require them to obtain work, even though they are legally not entitled to employment.

**Youth call on the government to provide greater protections for foreign domestic workers, and to support dedicated information campaigns focused on domestic workers' rights.** This includes re-evaluating legislation such as the current 'live-in rule' that requires domestic migrant workers to live in the same home as their employer, which exacerbates potential exploitation and abuse. In Hong Kong they are entitled to one day off where they are allowed outside of their employers' homes but, during the pandemic, some employers have started to insist that domestic workers stay even on these off days, further blurring work and personal life. Thus, it is critical during these times that the government clarifies the rights of migrant domestic workers and what constitutes exploitative employment practices.

**Youth call on the government to support and provide more community centers and safe gathering spaces for migrants and foreign domestic workers.** Migrant workers currently lack safe and comfortable gathering spaces because they often either live in cramped, subdivided flats, or are domestic workers

that must live in their employers' home. For their mental health and wellbeing, this necessitates further leisure spaces where they are able to access safeguarding services.

**Youth call on the government to invest support for higher and tertiary migrant education in China, and remove barriers to migrant children continuing their education past primary school.** Despite investment reforms in migrant education, many migrant children are still forced to return to their hometowns for middle school education and onwards. This risks separating them from their migrant worker parents as well as returns them to less developed education infrastructures, exacerbating rural-urban social inequalities.

**Youth call on the government to allow migrants to access essential services, such as housing, healthcare, and formal education, regardless of educational and economic status.** Due to recent policies implementing stricter employment requirements, migrant families in Chinese urban centres have become increasingly affluent and educated. These requirements have now extended to access to social services, leaving existing migrant families who exist outside of these requirements without support.

## Objective 17: Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration.

Discrimination towards non-white migrants in Hong Kong particularly impacts a migrant's access to educational and employment opportunities, which further hinders their social ability. Despite Hong Kong's status as a popular destination for foreign workers, migrants face rampant discrimination including in the hiring process and in the workplace itself. This discrimination exists for those workers' children and affects the educational opportunities available to them. This discrimination is evident in social attitudes, media portrayals, and even in the rhetoric in official public forums.

A particularly poignant example of discriminatory views being perpetuated by the government happened earlier this year when a senior public health official suggested that ethnic minorities were more likely to engage in behavior that would put them at risk of contracting COVID-19. Subsequently, many members of Hong Kong's South Asian community felt a rise in discriminatory treatment.

In China, due to the aforementioned recent policy changes, active discrimination against migrant families in urban centres has decreased. However, clear distinctions between 'migrants' and 'locals' persist, contributing to differences in access and social integration.

### Key Initiatives & Projects

- Youth-led panel discussions focused on recognizing and assessing the impact of discrimination towards migrants
- Student-led university initiatives to raise awareness of and combat negative rhetoric targeted at migrant and ethnic minority communities
- NGO-led events focused on promoting open dialogue and greater cultural understanding of migrant communities, including film festivals, discussion of country-specific current events, and history lectures

### **Key Recommendations**

#### **Youth call on the government to create campaigns to condemn discriminatory employment practices and correct ill-informed narratives and misperceptions about the employability of migrants.**

Consultations revealed that for many Black and Brown job applicants, they feel that prospective employers carry a strong sense of distrust about their skillset and English language abilities. Even if they are able to get the job, they face the possibility of being offered a lower wage or being treated differently than their white and Chinese counterparts in the workplace.

#### **Youth call on the government to implement education reforms targeted at creating more inclusive learning environments for migrant children.**

Many local schools in Hong Kong will turn away non-Chinese students due to the perception that because these students do not come from a Chinese speaking household, they will not be able to keep up with other students. This often leaves migrant children with very few choices in what school they can attend and further hurts their prospects for social mobility in Hong Kong if they are unable to enroll in a school in which they can learn Cantonese. For those migrant children who are able to enroll in a local school, they will still face discrimination, which includes racist remarks from teachers and being placed in lower level Chinese classes, preventing them from ever being able to adequately learn the local language.

**Youth call on the government to promote more public discourse about migrant communities and reasons for migrations.** The majority of Hongkongers descend from a family member that migrated to Hong Kong only a few generations ago, and for many of the same reasons that migrants from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa come to Hong Kong. Tying the history of Hong Kong to the underlying immigrant story can be a way to promote unity and empathy amongst these communities.

**Youth call on the government and state media in China to promote discourses that break down the distinctions between ‘migrant’ and ‘local’,** that perpetuate discrimination and Othering of migrant families in urban centres.



## Objective 18: Invest in Skills Development and Facilitate Mutual Recognition of Skills, Qualifications and Competences

Access to skills development services is crucial to migrant job mobility and overall ability to contribute to Hong Kong society. Despite this, there is very little government support for genuine skill development programs, and those programs that do exist tend not to target any particular professional skills.

As noted previously, in China, access to education beyond the primary school level remains a significant challenge for migrant children. This causes growing disparities between rural children of migrants, and urban youth, leading to limited opportunities for social mobility for rural youth. Further, migrant workers in urban centres, who have not established a strong network, struggle to transfer their skills to new employment and often return home or to different cities. This creates a transience with repercussions on both theirs and their families wellbeings.

### Key Initiatives and Projects

- Corporate-led initiatives involving development of vocational skills, workshops to teach migrants and refugees how to write CVs, and providing job interview advice.
- NGOs helping migrants and refugees seek out internships and apprenticeships.
- NGOs offering free or subsidized Cantonese language courses.

### Key Recommendations

**Youth call on governments to ensure access to skill development programs.** Since most of the vocational and professional skill development services are carried out by the private sector, the government can work to ensure that these services are accessible to migrants by providing subsidies or establishing partnerships between NGOs, private institutions, and employers so that migrants do not have to shoulder the full financial burden of these services.

**Youth call on the government to incentivize employers to invest in the development of professional and vocational skills of migrant workers.** Most employers, especially for small to medium sized businesses, are unlikely to pay for their workers' skill development despite the strong long-term benefits for both the worker and the employer.

## Conclusion

Despite a relatively open-arms attitude with respect to their borders, there is still much to be done to ensure that economic migrants in Hong Kong are able to access the services they need, and are treated with dignity and respect.

Although anti-discrimination laws exist, and the government does provide a variety of services and subsidies for migrants and refugees, there are often policy gaps in the implementation of these programs. To some extent, they have left the provisioning of crucial services to NGOs and other private institutions. Therefore, it is critical that the government increases communication and collaboration with civil society actors that work closely with migrants on the ground, and understand critical needs.

Similarly, in China, further work needs to be done to ensure equitable opportunities for migrant children and children of migrants, as well as to combat discrimination against migrants.

Youth-led organizations and migrant youth advocates, in particular, can play an important role in ensuring that migrant voices are heard and that any policy decisions are capturing the needs of the most vulnerable portions of the migrant population. Therefore, **youth call on the government to collaborate with youth and migrant-led organizations to assess current policies and programs in order to strengthen the commitment to meet the needs of migrants**, and to expand the coverage of those services that have been successful.

## Contacts

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