Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the world and is often perceived as the favourite of the discriminated against and economically underdeveloped peoples of the world. Despite decades, despite endless assertions about the declining influence of religion in the lives of people in the wake of modernization and globalization, Islam has shown a manifestation and continuity in Hong Kong is surprising because religious affinity is less recognized or rewarded. The popular religions here are Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity. Being a Muslim, I have to face Islam along with these other major religions amongst others only 1% of the population. However, a notable number of conversions to Islam amongst Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong are occurring.

According to Hong Kong’s Majid Ammar Mosque, conversions in the territory average 60-70 per year, and more than 70% are Filipino domestic helpers. The vast majority are women. This, added to the fact that there is a long history of bitter relations between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines, makes the confluence of these factors unique in the worldwide experience of conversion to Islam.

Philippines in Hong Kong

Conversion is not a new phenomenon, especially not to Filipinos, since their country has been facing severe economic crisis for well over two decades. What started as a temporary measure to alleviate economic pressure, has become a permanent way of life for many Filipinos. Hong Kong became a popular destination due to its proximity to their motherland and the higher wages. In the early 80s, Hong Kong began to experience enormous urbanization and industrial development resulting in a huge demand for labour. Local women escaped domestic service for regulated and well paid factory jobs, which led to a shortage of female domestic workers in Hong Kong. Filipinos became the best option because of their reputation for language skills, educational levels and pleasant personalities. Initially employed by a few expatriate community members, their number steadily rose to 140,000 (September 1999), making them the largest non-Chinese community in Hong Kong.

Filipinos nonetheless comprise the most disadvantaged community in Hong Kong. Discrimination is reflected in particularly strict immigration rules and pay slashes for domestic workers by the Hong Kong Government, public criticism of their weekend gatherings in public spaces, and labour abuses such as the inordinate monitoring of their work areas by employers. These are only a few examples; many others occur more subtly. Filipinos resist this discrimination by forming strong local networks among themselves, which become the primary agency through which Filipinos come into close contact with Pakistani men, giving rise to the circumstances conducive to conversion. Apart from social interaction and inter-marriage with Pakistani men, their prior contact with Muslims, through their foreign work experience in the Middle East, has drawn a huge influx of converts in recent decades, despite endless assertions about the declining influence of religion in the lives of people in the wake of modernization and globalization. Islam has shown a manifestation and continuity in Hong Kong is surprising because religious affinity is less recognized or rewarded. The popular religions here are Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity. Being a Muslim, I have to face Islam along with these other major religions amongst others only 1% of the population. However, a notable number of conversions to Islam amongst Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong are occurring.

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