

# **LGBT+ Labour Migrants in Hong Kong**

Participatory study on the subject of personal religiosity and spirituality  
among homosexual, bisexual and transgender migrants

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## Abbreviations list

DH – Domestic Helper

DW – Domestic Worker

FDW – Foreign Domestic Worker

FILO – Filipino Lesbian Organization

Hong Kong SAR – Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

ILO – International Labour Organization

LGBT+ – Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender +

LegCo – Legislative Council of Hong Kong SAR

MDW – Migrant Domestic Worker

MFMW – Mission For Migrant Workers

UAS – University of Applied Sciences

## ABSTRACT

This study was commissioned by a practitioner and a student of Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Helsinki), Danila Timofeev. This is as an individual, separate body of research, conducted for student's thesis work. It is based on empirical evidence (observation) as well as group interviews with service users and service providers. The field observations and research were conducted during the autumn of 2017 and spring of 2018 as part of practitioner's international exchange terms, while serving and studying as an intern in a working life partner organization in Hong Kong (MFMW Ltd). The study investigated the subject of personal spirituality and religiosity among the so-called domestic workers (labour migrants) in Hong Kong, whose sexuality is different from the mainstream sexual identity (sexual minorities). The exposure to this subject was caused by the contact with self-organized LGBT+ migrant organizations and the following immersion process of the practitioner in one of the organizations (FILO Hong Kong) which was facilitated by the MFMW. As a result of the immersion process and observations on the field, the decision was made to investigate subjects of spirituality among the members of the group, with their active contribution. Eventually, such topics as personal religiosity, relations between LGBT+ community and religions and the issues of fluidity of identity arose from the conversations, interviews and observations. The aim of the study was to empower the service users and members of the community by giving them a platform to speak openly about their issues in open discussions and group interviews ("sharing sessions"). One of the broader goals of the study is to start a discussion on relevant, but scarcely researched topics of alternative Christian spirituality and the effects of exclusion of LGBT+ community from spiritual life (especially in Asia). The findings of the research revealed the connection between such phenomena as personal spirituality and self-organization, belonging of migrants to diasporic communities and how the exclusion and marginalization in home countries prepared the platform for migrants' self-representation in Hong Kong. Key concepts of this work are: LGBT+ rights, multiple discrimination, labour migration, identity negotiation, participation, liberalization.

## 1. Introduction

The topic of this paper is rather multidimensional, but the main body of work is targeted to reveal the issues of exclusion of LGBT+ migrant workers in Asia from the mainstream religious organizations and traditions. Providing discussion topics for further study is crucial as well.

While this document's central focus is on methodology of the study and its concrete findings, it is necessary to provide the background information on why this research is conducted for the thesis work and what main objectives are behind it, as well as what learning experiences are possible to be derived from such a research.

Researcher is seeking to understand, in the process of conducting this work, how personal religiosity and spirituality of LGBT+ migrants is shaped in the context of labour migration and mobility. Challenges presented by the multiple discrimination in society and mainstream religion are investigated as well. To reveal how the exclusion based on sexual identity shapes spirituality of migrants is the main aim of the practitioner, according to his professional interests in labour migration, identity formation and construction and personal religiosity.

Some would say an under-investigated topic, it is narrow in its context but also quite rich for findings and observations. As the issues of multiple discrimination, exclusion and human rights arise simultaneously, the findings of this study are seen by the author to be relevant for the general application in community and diaconal work. Participatory research methods are also chosen, with hopes to increase the level of plurality of knowledge for the subject of identity, which is arguably a field where the plurality of opinions and individual positions are valuable. Higher level of participation, as a process, can be considered one of the aims of the work itself.

Specific location of Hong Kong SAR and the target group (migrant domestic workers) are both challenging and encouraging. Female migrant domestic workers are one of the groups of discriminated people which are continuously mentioned by the media and academia, but usually on a generalized level. Going deeper into specific issues, such as migrants' sexuality and gender identity and working with small, self-organized groups of interviewees is a necessity and a privilege at the same time, especially in this research conducted by the Diaconia student. The possibilities to simultaneously pose theological questions and provide a discussion for the "hot topics" in modern Christian practice are motivating factors in this complex work.

## **2. The issue of multiple discrimination**

### **2.1 The phenomenon of migrant domestic workers**

Worldwide, Migrant Domestic Workers (or MDWs) are a growing force on the labour market, due to globalization and continuous labour force export from the developing countries into the developed ones. A significant portion of these transnational workers are concentrated in Asia. According to ILO (2011) in Asia at least 21.5 million men and women work in private households (that accounts for 41 percent of world's migrant domestic workers). Hong Kong, alongside Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and some other developed economies is one of the employing countries for MDWs in Asia, while countries such as Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri-Lanka and India are sending countries, exporting their labour resources.

Most domestic workers in Hong Kong come from the Philippines or Indonesia (both almost equally 49 % out of the whole number of MDWs in Hong Kong). Almost 100 % of domestic workers in Hong Kong are female. The employment of MDWs in Hong Kong is constituted by the law of Hong Kong, particularly the Employment Ordinance of Hong Kong (chapter 57). The official term used for this category of labour is "Domestic Helper" (or DH). Immigration Ordinance (Chapter 115) and the Employees' Compensation Ordinance (Chapter 282) are regulating the process of employment as well. Hong Kong recognizes domestic work as grounds for issuing a working visa, but the type of visa is very specific. Certain policies that are applied exclusively to domestic workers, such as the two-week rule and an infamous mandatory live-in rule, make the type of working contract that MDWs are signing unique in the employment practice of Hong Kong. It is called "Standard Employment Contract". This contract would typically allow for a visa to stay in Hong Kong, but the worker must permanently reside by the address of the employment (in the household of the employer), the worker cannot be granted a permanent residence in Hong Kong regardless of the length of their stay, and the worker must leave Hong Kong, if their contract is terminated, in 14 days.

As Rezaul & Cojocaru (2015, 51) note, Domestic Workers Convention 2011 (N 189) has been ratified by only one country in Asia: the Philippines, but most of the employing countries established their own specific laws to regulate the employment of MDWs. The Convention is a rather important document which outlines the basic rights of domestic workers worldwide. Without its ratification, employing countries such as Singapore, Taiwan or Hong Kong are being guided mostly by their own domestic policies in the practice of importing this cluster of working force into their labour markets. In Hong Kong, these policies are dictated by local economic situation, vulnerable position of Hong Kong SAR as a "special region" of China (de facto ruled from Beijing) and overpopulation in Hong Kong. Basic human rights of the migrant workers are not properly taken into considera-

tion: only the fact that permanent residence is not possible for MDWs in any scenario is alarming enough already.

As an example, similar situation is unfolding in Singapore, where MDWs are experiencing exclusionist policies (such as a live-in rule and no hope for permanent residence) that effectively put them into a sanctity of a family but prevents incorporation into wider society (Yeoh & Soco 2014, 173). This kind of disposition of female domestic workers in employing countries can be called a trend in international labour and nation-building policies and practices.

As observed by the author of this paper during his practice in the Mission For Migrant Workers in Hong Kong, domestic workers' rights and freedoms are constantly violated, starting from the practice of underpayment or non-payment of wages by the employers, accusations of theft or other crimes (often proven false by the courts) and ending with cases of severe physical abuse and slave-like treatment of the employees by the employers. Moreover, usually (and in case of Hong Kong, too) female domestic workers work behind the closed doors of private households. That effectively makes them isolated and limits their mobility. They are hidden from public attention and are unapproachable by conventional policy tools (ILO 2013). In the situation where there is no ratification of Domestic Workers Convention and MDWs are often seen and treated as second-class citizens by local society and legislation, the severity of marginalization and unfair treatment are magnified by the absence of fair and just labour policies.

## 2.2 Multiple discrimination in case of MDWs

**Multiple discrimination** is a term used when a person or a group of people are discriminated on a basis of several discriminatory grounds. It refers to any combination of forms of discrimination against persons on the grounds of sex, age, ethnic origin, religion, beliefs or other grounds, either in additive or intersectional ways (EIGE 2018).

Virtually all MDWs in Hong Kong are women and belong to a different ethnicity and language group than a majority of the population of Hong Kong. Historically, they were under threat of distrust by local, especially female employers, and often because of their gender. The research conducted by Constable (1997) reveals that female domestic workers in Hong Kong Chinese society were seen to be someone to be restrained and disciplined. Many employers can have an attitude towards a domestic worker that can be described as "they cannot be trusted, I have to make sure they do not get into trouble". Commonly, Chinese female employers may not be comfortable with (especially young) Filipinas in their homes (Constable 1997, 545-547). This situation is, arguably, somewhat same to this day.

Moreover, many MDWs are an ethnic minority in their home countries, which is the case especially with Indonesians (but also, to some degree, with Filipinas). The majority come from difficult economic situations, e.g. living as single mothers or the only income providers for the families in the place of origin. They also often confess religion or faith that is not only different from mainstream religions of Hong Kong but can be perceived negatively because of negative press and “bad fame” it can have in Asia and around the world.

For these reasons, domestic workers are continuously in danger of multiple discrimination. Some cases can be as severe as discrimination can be based on five or six dimensions of diversity. But it especially affects those who are discriminated against even in their own cultures and countries – which is the case with sexual minorities. For example, studies conducted by Rogando-Sasot (2002) reveal that transgender women in the Philippines are ridiculed, discriminated and marginalized, often excluded from educational procedures such as taking exams in schools, or not allowed entrance to restaurants and other services.

Besides, there is an inequality of different minorities within the LGBT+ community itself, which is a different complex topic that requires close attention. Being a woman, a sexual minority, an ethnic minority and a domestic migrant with a low wage can be a very vulnerable position. In Hong Kong, where the policies particularly towards this category of workers are somewhat shaped to exclude them from the mainstream society and place them into a specific cluster of a “cheap labour” to close the gap in the local labour market, the situation looks very alarming. It creates a platform for serious marginalization of a significant group of residents.

### **2.3 Previous research, literature used in this thesis work**

While investigating about previous research on the exact subject of this study, it was revealed that there is relatively little to be found through academic databases. Some research conducted by Hong Kong University specialists for the topic of lesbianism among domestic workers was obtained. The work is called “Lesbianism among Indonesian Women Migrants in Hong Kong” by the author Amy Sim, as a chapter in the book called “As Normal As Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in mainland China and Hong Kong”. This article provided some academic data for understanding of the phenomenon of “tomboy” and “butch” lesbianism among MDWs.

For the information on MDW phenomenon in general and diasporic identity, three key works used as relevant literature in this study are “Migrant Domestic Workers in Asia: Transnational Variations and Policy Concerns” by Rezaul Islam and Stefan Cojocaru, “The Cosmopolis and the Migrant Domestic Worker” by Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Maria Andrea Soco and “The Present of Forgetting: Diasporic Identity and Migrant Domestic



Workers in Hong Kong” by Ming-yan Lai. Additionally, the study by Kayoko Ueno called “Identity Management among Indonesian and Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore” was used to draw parallels with the position of MDWs in Singapore.

Theoretical basis for methodology of this research is derived mostly from the students’ university’s publication, “Community of the Future: Challenges and New Approaches to Community Based Social Work and Diaconia from the CABLE approach”, edited by Jouko Porkka and Marja Pentikäinen.

Generally, there is enough data to be gathered from research done in other cities and countries, but mainly it is for the subject of identity in general. Concrete research on LGBT+ community issues is increasing worldwide, including (although rare) involving theological theories and discussions, but it rarely (if at all) touches the subject of personal religiosity or alternative spirituality.

### **3. Identity formation. Identity fluidity, sexual identities**

We already paid some attention to the topic of sexuality and sexual minorities, but it must be unfolded more to describe the aims of this research later in the paper. As it has been noted above, being a woman, a migrant and belong to a minority on grounds of sexuality can be a very vulnerable position. The complexity of the problem lies mostly in external factors, such as multiple discrimination in society, prejudice and conservative or exclusionist policies in the given country (in our case, in Hong Kong).

But it also somewhat stems from the fact that not all the specific minorities are given attention they require. As an example, research has shown that in many cases, transgender persons are experiencing more discrimination and prejudice and stay more obscure to the general society than gay men or lesbians. One research in the USA has revealed significantly more negative attitude towards transgender people among the general public, than towards gay men and lesbians (Lewis, Flores, Haider-Markel, Miller, Tadlock & Taylor 2017, 862). Sexual orientation and gender identity are not always addressed equally or are simply misunderstood or underrepresented in research and policy making related to LGBT+ rights and freedoms.

#### *Identity formation, sexual identity*

Speaking of MDWs in Asia whose sexual orientation and gender identity places them into a “minority within minorities” category, it can be noted that multiple discrimination and prejudice towards them can reach unparalleled levels. It is rather important to pay attention to these nuances when conducting a research or working with complex issues of LGBT+ migrant workers.

Identity formation among women who love women has been seriously under-investigated, as opposed to the studies on gay men sexuality. Non-heterosexual women are often pigeonholed as lesbians, and this simplification fails to consider the unique cultural and political aspects of this target group. (Julian, Duys & Wood 2014). In case of this study, it is extremely relevant to consider issues of both cultural and political aspects of lesbianism and transgenderism among the MDWs in Hong Kong.

La Barbera (2015, 2) notes that Identity negotiation can be described as a crossroad between self-representation and social categorization, a process with an aim to reach agreements on "who is who" in interactions within society. Migrants experience a drastic change in their life when they relocate with the purpose of earning incomes for themselves and their families. The process of negotiating their "new identity" begins. In the case of women and non-heterosexual people, migration often leads to drastic changes in self-representation (La Barbera 2015, 5). Gender fluidity can be a bigger factor for non-heterosexual people in migration process, and gender identity can be a defining one in identity negotiation process, out of all other dimensions of identity such as age, ethnicity, religion, income group and others.

Andrea (2015, 301) suggests that each person engages in a hierarchy of identifications where they choose (consciously or subconsciously) which group's norms and values will supersede others. This thesis is extremely relevant while observing migrants and, specifically, LGBT+ migrants and their identity formation process. The layers and dimensions of identifications they must engage in are many, and they experience multiple discrimination at the same time, thus making the pressure of identity negotiation many times higher than for a non-migrant person or a heterosexual individual.

The role of policies is especially significant in shaping migrant experiences. Different immigration policies may impact the way diasporic communities are engaged in the dialogue with the title nation, depending on the level of recognition and whether immigration policies in the host country tend to assimilate or provide a platform for an intercultural dialogue (Andreouli & Howarth 2012, 365).

In case of Hong Kong and LegCo's policies towards foreign domestic workers, there is, in the first place, no recognition of this group of migrants as candidates for subsequent permanent residence, regardless of the length of their stay in Hong Kong. Social negotiation of their status and identity is difficult in a long-term, in these conditions. In all aspects of their stay abroad, domestic workers are marginalized and it seriously impacts the way of their self-representation and the way they aggressively negotiate their identity, in all categories of it (including sexuality), with the local society. One of the nuances of this aggressive negotiation is a formation of self-organized groups and organizations, which sometimes call themselves "militant groups". There is large number of them in Hong Kong, particularly Filipino and Indonesian ones. They form on the platform of same nationality, language, identity, religious group as well as gender identity or sexuality as well.

FILO (Filipino Lesbian Organization) is one such group, consisting of a few members, whose sexual orientation is either lesbian or bisexual, or can even be transgender.

## **4. Background of the research, premises, research questions**

### **4.1 The main stakeholders in this research**

Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Helsinki)  
 Mission For Migrant Workers Ltd. (Hong Kong SAR)  
 St. John's Cathedral (Anglican Diocese of Hong Kong Island)  
 FILO – Filipino Lesbian Organization

### **4.2 Churches and religious organizations in Hong Kong. Acceptance of the LGBT+ community.**

According to Abdon-Tellez (personal communication 21.11.2017), LGBT+ groups in Hong Kong, such as “Rainbow Families” or “Ten Percent” started to surface in public only in the last ten years or so. Before that, the acceptance of LGBT groups and sexual minorities was low, and in some layers of the population non-existent. In a period when the domestic workers started massively arriving to Hong Kong to occupy domestic helper jobs (late seventies, early eighties), openly gay men or lesbian women were not allowed to take any governmental office jobs, as an example of one exclusive policy. Most first waves of MDWs were Filipinas, later Indonesians started to arrive as well, typically coming from conservative societies where it was a commonplace practice to “stay in the closet” in case the person had non-traditional sexual preferences.

However, even though coming to work in a Hong Kong society (predominantly non-acceptant of homosexual lifestyle at that time) was a complex challenge for migrants, it was also a new discovery for many LGBT+ persons that the social of Hong Kong was in the active stage of formation of the civil society. In the new conditions, possessing more freedom of gathering, speech and conscience, many homosexual and transsexual activists started to form into self-organized groups. Eventually the number of such groups, large and small, reached dozens of names.

Acceptance of such self-organized groups among the religious organizations and different denominations of Christianity in Hong Kong was very rare in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and stayed so until the very recent time. With the MDWs' population growing, different Christian organizations formed predominantly by the Filipino citizens began to appear, alongside with traditional Catholic and Protestant migrant congregations which were rising in numbers as well. Particularly new charismatic neo-protestant and neo-catholic groups

were growing rapidly. Overwhelming majority of Christians were openly anti-LGBT, typically explaining it from the position of religious dogmas and their interpretation of the Bible texts. It was quite customary for homosexual members of the congregations to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity or even aggressively advocate against homosexuality in fear of their sexual preferences being noticed or somehow revealed to their congregation. Most commonly, rapidly growing charismatic movements would have a strongly traditionalist, fundamentalist and conservative views on marriage and sexuality.

Despite the attitude of non-acceptance (towards LGBT+ persons and groups) stays strong in Christian circles (especially migrant congregations), the number of pro-LGBT+ Christians has been steadily rising, which became noticeable in the years between 2000 and 2010. One of the first organizations to have an open LGBT-ally position was Mission For Migrant Workers, even in the beginning of its existence in 1981. Feminist and liberal views of the Mission's core members might have been crucial in forming their stand on sexuality and gender identity, but more importantly, the organization stays strongly Christian and emphasizes Christian principles in its service to the migrant community.

It is also important to note that MFMW is officially an outreach program for an Anglican Church of Hong Kong, which has shown seemingly strongest support to LGBT+ community out of all other Christian denominations. Today, there is a small number of Christian organizations that are also formed or largely consisting of LGBT+ activists, with homosexual or transgender persons being able to take positions in the ministry, performing same-sex marriages and openly advocating for the acceptance of homosexual or transgender lifestyle among Christians. This kind of advocacy is most of the time fused with strong liberal political positions of the activists themselves. Theological views of members of "LGBT churches" are commonly antifundamentalist, interpreting Bible texts from strongly modern and liberal position.

#### **4.3 Mission For Migrant Workers, immersion process**

Partner working life organization for this research was Mission For Migrant Workers Ltd. (MFMW, The Mission), the oldest NGO serving migrant workers in Hong Kong. It is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. It was established in 1981 as an outreach working originally with Filipino migrants, but eventually extended its services to all migrants regardless of their national or religious background. The practitioner was serving in the organization as part of the international exchange program facilitated by Diaconia UAS for two terms in the autumn 2017 and spring 2018, during which the main research interview sessions took place. Specific research agreement was unnecessary (not mandatory) but all the research methods and practices were agreed upon and directed by student's supervisors and partners.

The Mission's roles in migrant services are many, and the practice established in more than thirty years of work allows for a rich and growing network of connections. Among others, the most visible partners of the MFMW in Hong Kong are Asia Pacific Mission For Migrants, churches such as Kowloon Union Church, St. Joseph Church and other Christian congregations and migrant organizations e.g. UNIFIL or Migrante International.

MFMW themselves became a centre for new projects, intercultural and interfaith dialogue platforms and important advocacy and research connections. Several social advocacy projects are run by the Mission, some short-running and some lasting for many years.

*Immersion process facilitated by MFMW.*

During the first term of work with MFMW the practitioner was assigned to do the so-called immersion process with one of the self-organized migrant groups active in Hong Kong. Eventually, the introduction to FILO (Filipino Lesbian organization) Hong Kong happened. The original idea behind the immersion practice is to expose a student to the dimension of the Mission's work that is more community development and advocacy oriented, as opposed to the case work in a walk-in centre and management of shelter facilities. The schedule for the immersion sessions was set to be at Sundays, traditional days when most of migrant organizations are active as Sunday is a most common day off for domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Working with FILO and learning more about the situation with the LGBT+ migrants' rights, their identity issues and their political and spiritual life, it was decided to involve members of FILO into a participatory research. The central topic of the research was to become personal spirituality and their views on religion, mainstream religious organizations and their relationship with people and migrants of non-mainstream gender identity and sexual orientation. Eventually, other parallel topics were raised in the interviews and discussions, such as political views, activity and self-organization of migrants, relationship with the local Hong Kong LGBT+ community and general issues of migrants' well-being.

#### **4.4 Working life connection and research questions**

Research questions for this study are:

1. How does exclusion (general, on policies level and exclusion from religious and spiritual life) based on sexual orientation and gender identity influence personal religiosity and spirituality of migrants in Hong Kong?
2. How does the exclusion influence their political views and social views?

3. How is self-organization shaped by alternative religiosity, political involvement and liberalization?

MFMW, as a working life partner organization, expressed interest in this research as a possible essay to publish in their annual bulletins or other publications. This type of a contribution by interns and students is traditional for the Mission, but there has been no research on the topics of sexuality and gender identity published yet. The publications with the usage of thesis materials are possible from the point of view of Diaconia UAS. Specific agreement needs to be signed before working life organization can use any materials of this thesis work in their publications. This way, theoretical material from this study can be used to create a specific product for the working life partners – an article, a booklet or an online report, the options are to be negotiated with the organization and its partners.

## **5. Aims of the research. Methodology**

### **5.1 Aims of the research**

To answer my research questions, certain steps of the process were conducted:

1. Three group interviews with open questions, in a manner of participatory research. Involve same contributors in all three sessions, as much as possible.
2. Three individual interviews with service providers on the topic of LGBT+ movement in Hong Kong, its history and present situation.
3. The study was shaped as a basement for the thesis work of the student.
4. The study was conducted as a beginning of a bigger research, possibly to continue after graduation of a student. Possibility of academic articles publication was negotiated with Diaconia University in Helsinki and partner organizations in Hong Kong.

Broader aims of the research were:

The main aim from the practitioner's point of view is to discuss the topics of alternative religiosity as related to a non-mainstream identity of the contributors to the research. In diaconal theology and theology in general, the awareness of personal and alternative religiosity and spirituality is growing, but research on the field is still rare, although the situation changes in recent years. It is planned to publish the findings and questions of the research in a form of thesis work and, if possible, consequently as an academic reports or articles, for awareness raising and as a contribution to an international theological and rhetorical discussion about the future of religion (and Christianity in particular).

From the working partners point of view, the aim is to give voice to the self-organized group of LGBT+ migrants, as one of many organizations consisting of migrant workers who are especially prone to multiple discrimination. Involving the student to this work has an aim of not only study and research, but to contribute to weekly routine of migrants in their social and near-political activities. Further possible publications of findings of the research can also increase awareness and serve as an advocacy tool.

## **5.2 Methodology**

Two main methods of research for this study were observation method (during the process of immersion) and participatory research. This work can be viewed as a mixed approach research, engaging ethnographic observation and immersion with the core group of interviewees as well as participatory methods of work.

Challenges to this type of research mainly rooted in the character of the research itself and a nature of LGBT+ groups. As a researcher, the student (who is a Caucasian Christian male and heterosexual) was presented with the task of establishing trust with the group of participants who are female, migrants, non-Caucasian and holding a non-mainstream sexual and gender identity.

## **5.3 Observation (ethnographic method)**

Observation was conducted during the above-mentioned process of immersion with the FILO Hong Kong. As a standard ethnographic method of research, the task was to participate with the members of FILO during their social and political activities as a temporary member and an intern of the organization. That included Sunday activities organized by FILO themselves or other self-organized groups, political rallies, closed private and open public LGBT+ events and specific dates on which migrants from South-East Asia celebrate national or local holidays. One important public event was the so-called "Pink Dot", an LGBT+ open air festival dedicated to sexual minorities rights and freedoms. Participation helped the researcher to analyse local context of LGBT+ movement in Hong Kong, observe relations between migrant and local LGBT+ activists and analyse, in a qualitative manner, the level of inclusion of migrants into the Hong Kong sexual minorities environment. Smaller events, organized mainly by the Filipino community in the city, gave a chance to analyse inner, national and diasporic character of relationships between LGBT+ migrant organizations and individuals.

Observation as a participant and a temporary member of FILO organization was immensely important for this research. Being submerged in the activities, such as Sunday festivals with a specific Filipino character of celebrations and political protests mainly concentrating on political issues of the Philippines, helped the researcher to establish

trust with the members of FILO and understand their needs and concerns from the humanistic, empathetic approach.

Theological approach to analyse the needs of the community was not the most important for this research, as it presents too much controversy in the context of contemporary debate on the issues such as marriage of the same-sex couples and other crucial “stumbling blocks” of the Christian communities in their relationship with LGBT+ rights movement. The researcher, as a diaconal theology student, concentrated on “contextual theology” approach, seeing partner organization as equals and somewhat mentors on the issues of marginalization of sexual and gender minorities. This attitude to community work and research provided the trust, needed for subsequent interviewing and sharing processes.

#### **5.4 Participatory research**

Participatory research has been organized as group interviews with the members of FILO (at one time joined by a member of another organization called FILGUYS). Group interviews, or group discussions (“sharing sessions”) were held in a free manner but with agreed participation of certain members of organizations. Questions for the interviews were structured to be open discussion topics, avoiding possibility of “yes or no” answers but instead giving opportunity to create vibrant topics for sharing. The interviewer’s role was to direct discussion into the topics of interest, within interviewees’ open answers. The main topics were proposed and pre-discussed with the members of the organizations, and the list of open questions was pre-distributed among the contributors in advance, before each session. There were three main sessions with the number of contributors being steadily 5 or 6 people. The sessions were held in an informal manner, using facilities such as cafeteria or a public park. All sessions were organized (setting dates and times) by the participants themselves, and were held during Sundays, when most domestic workers in Hong Kong have their weekly day-off and were able to participate in different activities, especially if they are socially or politically active. Each session was carefully monitored and chaired by all participants to last between 1,5 and 2 hours with a small break.

This type of endeavour can be considered a focus group interview, with a high level of inclusiveness. Its first purpose is investigatory and participatory research, but it also focuses on developing the practice of more effective and contemporary research methods, by experimenting with community-based participation ideas.

Three main topics that were proposed by the practitioner for this research and pre-discussed with participants were:



1. Migrants in Hong Kong, their sexuality and their relationship with mainstream religious organizations both in their motherland and in Hong Kong. How their migration influenced their self-representation.
2. Migrants in Hong Kong and their political views, the way it relates to religious organizations (especially mainstream religions) and how it influenced their spirituality.
3. Self-organization, diaspora and how migrants' new life abroad influenced both their sexuality and spirituality.

These topics were based on main research questions of this study. For each sharing session, 5-6 main open questions for the topic were designed by the interviewer, however as the participants pre-discussed the list, significant emphasis was put on questions that highlighted the feelings and opinions of FILO members on their marginalization and exclusion. This was part of the participatory trajectory, to design the interviews together with interviewees and involve them as equals into research on their issues.

Generally, participation in this study can be viewed as a strategy for empowerment, not (or not only) as a working method with the service users. The level of decision making on the part of contributors for this research was aimed to be as high as possible. The main criteria for each interview was to give "unfiltered" voice to the members of organizations, and analyse it in rhetorical way, using previous observation, diaconal/contextual theology and some previously conducted research and literature overview.

All interviews were recorded using a recording device (only audio recordings were made) and transcribed by the practitioner. Due to length of the group interviews, transcriptions concentrated on individual answers by the participants to the open questions and key points in their answers, as well as important topics raised while participants interacted with each other and the researcher. The full length of transcriptions for all three interviews is eleven pages of a standard WORD document.

## **5.5 Ethical considerations**

All the names of individual contributors were changed in the description of individual stories. Certain details of the stories are also changed, as a measure of protecting interviewees' identity. Instead of a certain age, only an age group of each person is mentioned in this paper. Participants themselves expressed concerns about the protection of their identity during the preparation for interview sessions, and ethical questions and identity protection issues were carefully discussed with them in advance. However, the details of personal statements and stories were changed in a way that does not put the liability of the research into question. Details of interviews that were crucial for revealing

issues of identity in its relation to spirituality, marginalization, self-organization and other key concepts of this work stayed unchanged as much as it was possible, to provide truthful and reliable content for the conclusive discussion.

Audio materials and their transcriptions are not to be distributed or published in any form.

Specific official permit for research was not needed from the organization (MFMW) but the whole process was facilitated by the supervisor in MFMW and every step was discussed and made known to the supervisor, as the mediator between FILO Hong Kong and DIAK practitioner.

## **5.6 CABLE approach to research**

CABLE approach to research & development was the main guideline for a practitioner for conducting both ethnographic method research and group interviews. The approach is not a method per se but rather a complex of strategies in conducting community work and research, formulated within CABLE project, which is the result of collaboration between DIAK Helsinki, Helsinki Deaconess Institute and Interdiac in Central and Eastern Europe (Addy 2013, 61). CABLE stands for Community Action Based Learning for Empowerment. The approach is derived from the development of participatory work methods through contextual theology and personal approach to community development.

The concept of exposure is a central one in CABLE. As previously practiced in DIAK during practical placements, the practitioner in this study first exposed himself to the researched target group using ethnographic observation and an immersion process. The main task in the beginning was to analyse own personality of the researcher (“own roots”) in relation to personalities of the research contributors and their community. Further on, as the process of immersion proceeds, the researcher deeply analyses their own biases and possible cultural prejudices which may be an obstacle for reliability of the research data.

Despite the significant differences in background (ethnic belonging, language, gender, class, sexuality and sometimes religion) it became evident during the research process that the practitioner’s own experience being a long-term labour migrant (and attending to identity crisis that follows it) served as a useful “vehicle” for the productive professional relationship between him and target group/contributors. Occupying “level grounds” with the interviewees and the community within which the research is conducted significantly decreases possibility of a one-sided, condescending attitude of a researcher to the target group. Simultaneously, immersion process and discussions related to self-exposure increase possibility of a deeper professional relationship within the studied community.

The exposure process, as developed by DIAK, is not a straightforward process and was not followed according to strict guidelines, but rather taken into consideration as a general trajectory of this study. Researcher exposed himself to the place, the community and the context within which he was working and researching together with the community, not only as a professional but as a person, whose personality and spirituality was shaped by certain life experiences. It is important to note, as Dhakal (2013, 152) suggests, that the CABLE approach is not necessarily a tool for the working practice but rather an orientation and attitude to professional practice that is aimed at understanding of the service user and a service provider as partners in research, each having their own strengths, assets and capacities for positive transformation.

### **Reliability, trustworthiness**

Due to a mostly qualitative character of this research and certain ethical considerations and limitations, the reliability of the data is arguable. No specific method of data check was systematically used during this study. However, the practitioner performed self-examination of his own identities, cultural roots and biases, according to the CABLE approach (“own roots” and self-exposure procedures). Through interviewing and debriefing with participants of the study, peer check was also performed. The self-examination was conducted in a qualitative manner, juxtaposing researcher’s own roots and identity to participants stories and opinions.

Relevance of the research, as seen by the stakeholders and participants, is in its participatory character, contextual theology application and empowering process of the data collection.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1 The impact of self-organization, political views and “belonging” of migrants within their diaspora on their newly negotiated/constructed identity**

This chapter will first generally describe certain phenomena that was observed during conducting the research and seeking for answers to research questions, such as observed diasporic identity among migrant domestic workers, larger economic freedom and purchasing power experienced by many of them in Hong Kong and shift in their political views. The connections between these observations are made to begin the discussion on the importance of all of these factors on main subjects of this study: how does it influence migrants’ spirituality? How do they see themselves as related to religious organizations? Particularly for LGBT+ migrants, what exactly enhances their freedom of expression and what are existing limitations?

Relevant group and individual contributions, as decoded from audio recordings of the interviews, are given in the second part of this chapter.

Diasporic identity among MDWs in Hong Kong is formed by a variety of factors, among which significant ones are inability to have a right of permanent residence, ongoing exploitation, prejudice and certain social demands that are placed on female MDWs by their national, social and religious practices and codes. One notable example is a phenomenon of keeping taking care, monetarily and emotionally, of MDWs' children back in their home country (including among interviewees for this research). This involves not only financial support, but constant connection with the families at home, especially by the means of social networking and mobile phones (Lai 2011, 570). Those LGBT+ migrants who have made attempts to “come out” to their families about their homosexuality or transsexuality, are often still pressured to marry and have children, due to the culture and traditions in their home countries and provinces.

The whole practice of living in the new place, away from families but having to provide financial and emotional care for families at home is noted by Lai (2011, 571) to be, for some MDWs, burdensome and oppressive. It appears to be challenging for heterosexual mothers as well but becomes a double emotional load for those with a complex story of being homosexual but having to play a traditional gender role in their home country. In Hong Kong, they have a chance to “come out” and openly have homosexual relationships, but some are forced to keep an image of a heterosexual person for their families in the home countries.

MDWs who are residing in the host country for a long period of time but are unable to neither settle there permanently nor cut the ties with their nationality completely (due to marital, motherly or other socially prescribed "feminine" duties), might experience very significant emotional pressure. National identity is not exactly the same neither it is fully transformed. In case of LGBT+ migrants, whose multiple identity includes an important component of being a sexual minority, national identity is often connected with normalized, socially prescribed roles of heterosexual mothers, daughters and wives. The dilemma between their new, openly homosexual, bisexual or transgender lifestyles and necessity to keep tight connections with their families at home is a serious issue, as observed during interviewing and interacting with migrant LGBT+ activists in Hong Kong. They respond that they love their children but are “tired of pretending” to be heterosexual.

*Purchasing power, larger degree of economic freedom, economic power.*

As one research among MDWs in Singapore reveals (Yeoh & Soco 2014, 178), many MDWs from the Philippines, after coming to Singapore to work, acquired greater purchasing power and freedom than in the home country. In Singapore, better incomes al-

lowed them to be more outgoing and purchase more goods for themselves and their families. That is one of the factors in changing the lifestyle of MDWs abroad. Another factor is ability to travel to other countries with their friends or alone.

Similar or identical factors were observed as relevant ones in the wellbeing of the participants of this study. Moreover, economic power is revealed to be one of the most important new powers in the life of LGBT+ migrant workers who serve as a main income provider for their families in their home countries. Almost all the interviewees stated that since they became main (or the only) income providers for their children and, sometimes, husbands, it became easier for them to negotiate their true sexual identity with families at home while living openly homosexual or transgender lifestyle abroad. New shift in power relations within their families is allowing for larger degree of the freedom of expression.

New opportunities while living abroad, tight female-only community and diasporic belonging all give rise to new, transforming understanding of culturally appropriate behavior within the groups of MDWs. For example, research conducted among Indonesian DWs in Hong Kong has shown that the so-called butch, tomboy and masculinized women are admired and draw attention as the high-status members of the community by other, non-masculinized women among the migrants (Sim 2010, 47). When butch type lesbian women are taking social roles of males in their diaspora and groups, and simultaneously make it into an admired role, they seriously challenge patriarchic norms of their domestic societies (especially in case of Indonesians). At the same time, this behavior can be perceived as a way to follow patriarchic norms, as women who construct their gender as “male” are, arguably, supporting the “normalized”, traditional binary of genders.

#### *Self-organization and a shift in political views of the LGBT+ migrants*

Self-organization of migrants, specifically MDWs, makes an unprecedented phenomenon in Hong Kong. Originally, many women meet in larger, older organizations such as Gabriela Hong Kong or UNIFIL (United Filipinos in Hong Kong), or on the streets while taking a rest at Sundays. Sunday meetings are typically observed in Hong Kong on the streets in certain locations, such as Central district, Causeway Bay or Kowloon peninsula. The phenomenon gathered positive and negative reactions alike from the local community. Thousands of women of South-East Asian origin are having their day off (usually their only day off during the working week) and spending time socializing and engaging in different activities, often organized by pro-active members of the community. These “street Sundays” gave rise to the large number of smaller militant groups and organizations.

When interviewed for the question of self-organization, interviewees responded:

“New members participate and join based on the same issues or interests. They become friends. Some organizations are dominated by a certain nationality, some are not. People find membership in LGBT+ organizations by a word of mouth, or through friends”.

As self-organization into smaller groups is a part of networking between the large number of bigger migrant organizations, all connected by the similar issues and goals, political and social views are often transferred from the large, politically active organizations to members of the community. Feminist and leftist views are the most typical ones, in the spectrum between “mildly” feminist and liberal left-of-centre to the pro-communist political position. Organizations mostly label themselves as “militant”, meaning a high level of organization and dedication with this term.

Many contributors stated that awareness of the connection between political positions and social issues came from big international campaigns, for example “One Billion Rising” (campaign and movement for women’s rights). Others also mention, as a reason of becoming more politically active, cases of violent abuse of MDWs that became infamous and gathered lots of attention of the media and public.

Among the participants of this study, leftist views were observed but were stated by FILO members to not be neither main reason nor aim of their organization. Issues of sexuality and gender expression are still prevalent in their advocacy and campaigns, and political debating comes together with the mainstream of other feminist voices. Nevertheless, it can be called a trend among the pro-active MDWs to take a more leftist political stand, specifically after joining the self-organized groups. That, together with feminist character of actions and rallies held or supported by the migrants in Hong Kong, forms a particularly liberal atmosphere, in which the acceptance of the LGBT+ becomes higher. Previously apolitical LGBT+ migrants, upon joining migrant groups or organizations, experience a change in their knowledge and social life towards liberalism, feminism, sometimes acceptance of socialist ideas and a new, enhanced understanding of justice, human rights and women’s rights. This transformation of views and values is not every time structured or systemic but is observed to be constant among the FILO or FILGUYS members. Some MDWs become generally more politically and socially active than others, but their new economic freedoms and the overall liberal and human rights-oriented climate influences nearly all members of the community.

*General observations on personal religiosity and spirituality – answering the main questions of this research*

How does all the changes happening in MDWs’ life during labour migration influence their religiosity and spirituality? How does religion, as one major diversity factor, interplay with the gender, sexuality and social status in the climate of general intolerance, marginalization and hostility? These are the main questions of this study, according to which the concrete research questions were posed.

Religion is noted by scholars to be one of the entities that has the most influence on sexuality, among other aspects of person's social life (Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Pitrelli, Bonacci & Cowie 2009). It is hard to argue that religious affiliation and participation influence both private and public expression of sexuality. Particularly Christianity has been critical and unaccepting of the LGBT+ lifestyle and the practice of homosexual marriage. The strong fundamentalist approach to interpretations of the Bible texts is still prevalent in Protestantism, specifically neo-Protestantism and charismatic movements. Christians in Asian countries, evangelized often by the American protestant missionaries, are noted to have traditionalist and conservative view on LGBT+ issues and marriage. Moreover, one study conducted in South Korea suggests that Korean Christians, for example, express a more uniformly conservative and religious discourse than even American Evangelicals (Jung 2016), despite the general growth in acceptance of homosexuality in the South Korea from 18 % in 2007 to 39 % in 2013.

Traditional, Confucian society of Hong Kong is still observed to be very conservative when it comes to acceptance of the LGBT+ rights and freedoms, even though changes are happening with the growing globalization and westernization. Christian churches and congregations are mainly remaining conservative, too (and generally non-accepting of homosexuality and same sex marriage).

However, LGBT persons' exclusion and marginalization evoke a stronger, more structured advocacy for their rights and freedoms, conducted by the activists in line with the contemporary human rights principles. In case of homosexual, bisexual and transgender migrants, excluded and discriminated in few dimensions of diversity at the same time, advocacy and self-organization become powerful tools for liberalization of views and practices. Encouraged by the liberal organizations to insist on their rights, LGBT+ migrants learn and adapt new political views.

At the same time, often deeply religious and diasporic LGBT+ migrants in Hong Kong are not interested in completely loosing connection with their original religiosity. The existence of organizations like St. John's Cathedral and MFMW encourages them to stay Christian while living a homosexual lifestyle and choosing same-sex partners, or openly living as transgender persons. The support from the liberal and feminist Christian organizations helps self-organized groups of migrants to become recognized voice in the LGBT+ advocacy work, but no less importantly, it challenges the conservative and fundamentalist approach in expressing Christian faith. While this challenge is mainly coming to modern Christianity from the secularized society, in case of the practice of the MFMW in Hong Kong it is coming from *within the Christian circles themselves*.

The issues of exclusion of LGBT+ migrants and their marginalization are noticed by the liberal and feminist Christians and are mostly agreed to be inhumane and unjust, judging from the position of both modern human rights-based approach and liberal, non-

fundamentalist theology. The long and rich practice of social advocacy shapes institutions like MFMW to become an avantgarde of social changes, despite belonging to the traditionally conservative religion. The migrants, left with no choice but to practice their lifestyles according to their sexual preferences and gender expression, find themselves in a new society of Hong Kong, where formally the Law of Hong Kong suggests freedom of speech and expression. Being excluded from the mainstream religious organizations based on their sexuality, they form self-organized groups and congregations.

It is discovered during conducting this research that almost 100 % of interviewed MDWs noted that they are still Christian and are keeping their faith despite their original religious beliefs are challenged by the realization of their sexuality. That might be explained by the very strong traditional upbringing and diasporic connections between the MDWs in Hong Kong. Their current Christian belonging, however, takes shape of non-denominational, or alternative Christian practice. Some participants responded that their spirituality or faith are “free” and are not necessarily formed by any specific religious organization. Some other said they still consider themselves denominational Christians, but they do not attend the congregations, or attend rarely.

Answers to the research questions of this thesis work are complex, but generally can be described this way: interviewed migrants preserve their inner spirituality and faiths despite multiple discrimination issues. Their status (as migrant domestic workers) shapes their spirituality and religiosity to a good degree. Interpretation of Bible texts is also influenced by respondents’ constant involvement in political activities and advocacy. Self-organization helps to establish independent community within which LGBT+ migrant women can express both their sexuality and spirituality freely, without fear of marginalization and religious judgement.

## **6.2 Individual/group contributions**

### *Individual contributions*

The names of the individual contributors have been changed due to ethical considerations and for the protection of the respondents’ identity. Instead of revealing the concrete age, it was decided to reveal an age group.

All of the individual answers and sharing quotations are provided to reveal certain phenomena described as findings of this research, and to underline certain parallels in respondents’ answers and opinions.

*"Nick" (Age group: 35-40 y.o.), Philippines*



Identifying as a transgender man, Nick came to realize his sexual identity early in life but was able to fully express it only when started working abroad.

During the group interviews, he pointed out that LGBT+ migrants in Hong Kong are discriminated just because they are migrants, to begin with.

- "We are already discriminated as migrants. Another burden for us is that we belong to LGBT community. Many employers terminate our contracts if they find out we are homosexual or bisexual. They don't understand our identity"

Regarding local LGBT+ circles, he responded:

- "If you are part of LGBT and a wealthy person, it is a different situation. Many (but not all) LGBT+ persons in Hong Kong are wealthier than the migrants, so they are less discriminated. We, as LGBT+ migrants, feel that there is a wall between us and them. It is not only a personal, racial or cultural wall, additionally it is an economic wall"

For the questions of personal spirituality and religion, Nick shared that since childhood, he was upbrought in a conservative Catholic setting. He believed in God as part of the Churches' teaching and according to his Catholic education until he reached high school age. However, after that he started to realize that the Church is also involved in political life, and multiple news of corruption among Catholic priests discouraged her to keep trust in religious organizations.

- "Church in my eyes is one of the discriminators and executors of power over people through alignment with political establishment and education. When I realized it is about the power and money, I lost trust in the organizations. I keep personal faith in God. I prefer to believe in God but cannot believe in people who discriminate me".

*"Vivian" (Age group: 30-35 y.o.), Philippines*

A lesbian woman, she comes from the mixed background where the father is a Catholic and the mother is a Muslim. The upbringing in her family was traditional and conservative, and Vivian was expected to marry and give birth to children (sons) and live life expected of a heterosexual woman. Despite realizing her homosexuality and trying to reveal it to her parents, she was pressured to marry and have few children. Eventually, she divorced her husband and went to work in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, she started to openly live homosexual lifestyle, meeting her lesbian partner. She described her struggle with the family this way:

- "I go back home sometimes, and they still pressure me to re-marry my ex-husband. I love my children, but I said many times I am not going to re-marry him. I also told my father: "I gave you sons, I've done my duty, now I live the only way I can, please don't expect me to go back to live with a man, because I can't".

Her beliefs were affected after she openly started to live lesbian lifestyle in the way that she no longer pays attention to rituals and external religiosity. Vivian shared that she observed people in churches often acting like "righteous" persons during masses or celebrations, but displayed intolerant, hostile and hypocritical behaviour in civil settings. This and her lesbian sexual orientation persuaded her to have an image of God as a personal spiritual companion, who understood her better than social, rather than the image of God that was often presented in formal religious settings. One of her direct responses states:

- "No matter what, I know God loves me. When people around me pointed out to me that I am a sinner, I felt God comforted me exactly at these difficult moments. "

"Kristen" (Age group: 25-30 y.o.)

Kristen identifies as a bisexual woman. She also underlined that she is certainly a woman and never felt the effects of gender fluidity. She joined FILO after becoming friends with some of the members.

She describes her personal spirituality as non-confessional, even though she still considers herself Christian. Upbrought in Christian traditions and having lived and worked in Islamic countries before, she developed high level of tolerance to alternative spiritual practices and other mainstream religions.

Responding to the question of LGBT+ rights and exclusion among religious organizations, she shared:

- "I don't think it is right to discriminate anyone, including LGBT persons in the name of religion. Original teachings of Christianity, for example, are putting love, as a concept, in the foundation of this religion. People manipulate Bible texts too much and distort them in order to justify their intolerance and hatred".

Kristen was apolitical before joining FILO but started to engage in political rallies and protests after becoming part of the organization. She described her transformation to politically and socially active person as a gradual process of becoming more aware of violations of women's rights, issues of domestic workers worldwide and problems of the LGBT+ community.

### *Group contributions*

One of the important conclusions drawn from the group interviews is that generally, FILO members experience discrimination because of several different factors: racial, social status, sexuality and gender being the main dimensions. Both sexuality and migrant status were regularly named as the first factors for discrimination, followed by the race or ethnic belonging.

Because all the interviewees are employed as domestic workers, they all agreed that there is a social categorization in Hong Kong that is to blame for their discrimination. One of the responses from the group interviews:

- "In Hong Kong they see us as only one thing: maids. They categorize all South-East Asians into different groups, some are cleaners, some are bus drivers, some are something else. We are maids for the HK society. But the main reason for that is our own country's policies. We think they are forcing us to work as maids abroad. It's the Philippines government who is responsible."

It was revealed in practical examples during the group interviews how the labour export within Asia takes place. Most participants in the discussion were educated engineers, doctors, teachers, nurses and other professionals. However, after struggling financially with small incomes in their home provinces in the Philippines and being unable to provide for themselves or their children, many women are directed to so-called "training centres" which provide training specifically for the "maids" and then assist with employment abroad. These centres charge large sums of money for this so-called training, and often illegally. Most migrants who analyse this practice from socio-political point of view see this as a conspiracy and an unhealthy practice that is aimed at exporting Filipino women as a "cheap labour" and simultaneously overcharge large sums of money simply to be able to go abroad.

For the subject of local churches and religious organizations in Hong Kong, the discussion generally was directed to reveal if LGBT+ migrants experience any support or acceptance from them. The response among the FILO members was strikingly similar. All of them agreed that it is unquestionably easier to "come out" about their sexuality in Hong Kong than in the Philippines, however number of organizations in Hong Kong that are truly accepting and serving them regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity is limited. Anglican and Methodist groups and churches were mentioned as somewhat LGBT-friendly.

There were LGBT priests mentioned, but it was revealed that homosexuality creates division in the congregations, which is also commonplace around the world. Hong Kong has number of LGBT+ congregations, oriented to provide services for sexual minorities. However, often these communities don't form voluntarily – priests and pastors who are

homosexual themselves often are expelled from their home churches and are left with no choice but to organize their own organizations. This phenomenon was commented to be as exclusive and discriminatory by the LGBT+ migrants, as they essentially do not see themselves as “special” but rather “normal” and have no original determination to separate themselves from major religions and denominations.

During the group interview sessions, contributors expressed strong feminist views. Both in the Philippines and in Hong Kong, in their opinion, the exclusion generally happens at least partially because of the male dominance in the priesthood. This might be an arguable opinion, but during this research it was crucial to provide migrants with a platform to speak out openly about their views in an unfiltered way. All the respondents agreed that female-led Christian organizations are generally more accepting of the LGBT+ lifestyle than the male-led ones. Quite many homosexual or transgender priests or pastors in Hong Kong are women. Some even belong to the self-organized migrant groups.

One of the main revelations of this participatory research was established: all the participants agreed that to some degree, official religious organizations are the manipulators of power and wealth, especially when acting as part of the state. FILO members are confident that Christianity and the idea of God are separated from many religious groups and congregations which deviated from the teaching of Christianity and became one of the powers of oppression. Specific stress is not made on people within Christian congregations, but on mechanisms of control through education, political involvement, taxation and other instruments of power. While this might be an extremely leftist point of view, it was striking that LGBT+ migrants expressed it uniformly and at the same time openly shared their personal spiritual beliefs and their individual Christian culture and ideals.

As women of sexual minorities and migrants, all the interviewees experienced discrimination many times in their lives. During observations and discussions, it was disclosed that they connect their sexual orientation and gender identity to the changing of their spiritual belonging and practices. The transformation from receiving traditional religious education to losing trust in their home congregations (or even in religious leaders altogether) happened typically in the moment of their attempts to negotiate their sexuality with the oppressive, discriminative society. After the struggle with traditionally prescribed models of “female behaviour” and realizations of certain political ideas, all of them turned to personal, alternative way of expressing their faith, but interestingly, none have responded that they lost their spirituality altogether.

This finding of a newly formed alternative Christian (or just spiritual, in some cases) identity is especially striking in the light of notion about the pressure that identity negotiation can put on a person that experiences multiple ways of being discriminated. If we all continuously choose what different hierarchies will help us to negotiate and construct more comfortable, safer position in the society, it is remarkable that persons who have seen

discrimination from both religious and state organizations are keeping the image of God and personal faith as one of their motivators and cultural orienteers in life.

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1 Working with people from the contextual theology approach

This study has been conducted from the contextual theology approach, which, according to CABLE approach to community work, is targeted to establish new ways of working with people and even form new ways of understanding theology, especially from the diaconal perspective (Addy 2013, 140).

While working with the marginalized groups on the field, the student had a chance to practice new ways of “being a church”. In that sense, participatory and human-rights based social work meets with new approach to diaconal work, which is standing with people and empowering them to speak about their issues and share their ideas without fear of experiencing prejudice from the church worker or a social worker.

Understanding “church”, or “ecclesia” widens with this type of diaconal work and, arguably, goes to its original intention in the teaching of Christ, where social boundaries were erased and radically empathetic position of the “servant” was established. What is still rarely discussed in the Christian congregations is: “Why are we not practicing this kind of contextual theology widely today?”. This study, while giving voice to the excluded and discriminated persons, revealed that their position can be clear: it is the “white male dominance” in the clergy of the Churches that is often the obstacle for forming the community of equality, relevant for today’s changing society. While that view might be considered arguable, it is impossible not to take it into consideration if we are *really* interested in forming new ways of working with people, especially “on the street”.

Similar to current views in community development on the importance of *participation*, where the service users’ views and opinions are considered, and people’s involvement in decision-making (when it is related to their well-being) is crucial, it is necessary to raise corresponding attitude in diaconal and Christian work.

This might be the new way of understanding theology: service means empathy and non-condescending approach, as opposed to privileged, top-down position. Whether we admit that Christian Church has been deviating from this approach for centuries or not is irrelevant. What is relevant today, as many studies and work practices today reveal, is that to effectively reach out to people in a modern globalising and liberalized world, we are to challenge our biases as organizations, not as persons only, and act to build bridges of trust with marginalized communities and groups.

## 7.2 Feminisation, liberalisation... liberal theology?

Another important aspect that this work has revealed is that liberalization and feminisation phenomena within Christianity are observed not only in developed countries, but in all cultures and among different confessions.

Feminisation of priesthood has been researched (albeit not broadly) in the Nordic countries. In Finland, as many as 40 percent of clergy were women by 2010 and in Sweden, similar number is 45 percent (Niemelä 2010, 6). This trend is also growing, and the age of women who study theology and pastoral training is getting younger.

The same study reveals that in Finland, female theologians are increasingly more liberal than their male colleagues, and as many as 68 percent of female clergy regard themselves as liberal persons (Niemelä 2010, 7). Being “liberal”, in this context, means promoting rights of minorities among other characteristics.

During conducting this thesis work in Hong Kong, the author observed liberal views of the female members of organization that serves predominantly female population. The organization is also decidedly Christian; Christian values are the core of the Mission’s work, as an outreach program for Anglican Church of Hong Kong. Male members of that type of organization are expressing strong liberal views as well. Being Christian and liberal, in their context, means promoting the rights of minorities, including the ones based on the gender identity and sexual preferences.

While in Asia it is still a very under-investigated issue, it is at least somewhat clear to the author of this paper that there is a connection between the feminisation and acceptance of the LGBT+ community and other marginalized minorities. Together with all the interviews and discussions conducted on the field, it puts into a striking focus the notion of the male dominance in Christian authority positions and its arguable connection to the fundamentalism, conservative views on same-sex marriage and even prejudice towards certain minorities.

The difficulty in drawing conclusions for this work lies especially in the lack of existing relevant research on the topics of liberalisation of Christianity, exclusion from society and religious life based on sexuality and how alternative and deeply personal spirituality is shaped outside of the mainstream contexts.

### 7.3 Recommendation for further research

Main research questions of this study found feedback among the target group and the answers/observations provided plenty of material for analysis. All three main topics - exclusion, personal religiosity and self-organization – were unfolded well and the interconnection of all these issues, their interplay was revealed with rich findings and some unexpected conclusions.

At the same time, participatory and human-rights based approach of this research made it possible for contributors to express their views openly and without regard to mainstream theology or establishment. Interviewees were satisfied with the process of the participation. However, they noticed that researchers and media still engage them from the top-down approach. There is not enough voice given to the discriminated groups. Not enough of their experience and views are taken into consideration while researching about their issues and conducting studies on their identity.

Thus, topics and challenges presented to scholars in this field of research are many. First, religious and Christian scholars and practitioners are still majorly avoiding the topic of alternative sexuality, which is reflected in relatively small number of materials that can be found on the topics of homosexuality and spirituality. Generally, identity negotiation has been researched rather thoroughly in the last few decades, however the way sexual identity and religious identity, as one of several main diversity dimensions, interrelate and influence one another, needs further research.

Quantitative data for this work was very hard to find. The necessity of more statistics gathering among the migrant domestic workers related to their sexuality is obvious. This task is presented with the difficulty of approaching LGBT+ migrants, who are often avoiding not only public, but any appearance in media, academia or investigation in general. Establishing more trust with this population is the most significant assignment to the researcher on the field.

While and upon conducting this research, the student understood the process of participatory community work deeper, which lead to the interest in further participatory studies and ethnographic ways of researching. The findings, however, are complex and challenging, as there are many topics interconnecting: feminization and liberalization in Christianity on the one hand, growing acceptance of LGBT+ lifestyles and homosexual marriage in society on the other and questions of migration in the globalising world.

Addressing these issues all at the same time is a daunting task. As modern Christians, scholars or practical workers, we need to challenge our understanding of the future of the Christian church. As an organ that is supposed to serve the society, should the Church pay attention to the changes within the society? How can the Church not provide services for LGBT+ communities (such as gay marriage ceremonies) if it is acting as a

state actor, or is widely accepted as a state-forming entity? Why Christianity, which was formed and preached originally as an extremely liberal (by its day standards) spiritual teaching, became the one that is clearly exclusive, elitist and intolerant of certain groups of people?

Moreover, the issue of self-organized Christian groups and personal religiosity needs deeper researching. If people today are free to organize their own groups, they start to justly ask themselves: "Do we still need the authority of the Church leaders? How are we supposed to comply with their dominance if it is discriminating against our being and our lifestyle?". It is necessary to make effort to understand different minorities, including sexual or gender-based ones, in their rejection of official and mainstream religious practices and even organizations themselves. Giving them a chance to speak openly in the context of academic research and community development work is crucial. It is a way to build the bridge between the excluded ones and the exclusive majority, and that bridge, originally formed by prejudice and fundamentalism, must be built mainly from the effort of that majority today.



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