

## **EO Files (December 2016)**

### **“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief”**

#### **Time to back gay rights under the law**

I saw scenes of solidarity on display as the Hong Kong Pride Parade swept through the heart of the city in celebration of the vibrant LGBTI community on 26 November.

A downpour and chilly weather did little to dampen 6,800 participants' desire for sexual minorities to enjoy the same basic rights as everybody else.

LGBTI discrimination is rife. Instances are vividly recorded in a study the Equal Opportunities Commission published in January in conjunction with the Gender Research Centre of the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Chinese University.

In schools, many LGBTI students told us they were humiliated and taunted by their peers and even teachers.

In employment, we heard stories of sexual minorities facing multiple obstacles in finding work as well as being confronted with hostility in their workplace.

And even when carrying out simple activities such as renting a flat or going to the hospital, individuals are in constant trepidation that their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status would leave them open to discrimination.

In the absence of legislation outlawing discrimination on such grounds, there are no means to ensure sexual minorities can fully participate in society. This harms the individuals themselves and their exclusion is also detrimental to the development of our city. During my recent meetings with leaders in various fields, including lawyers, investment bankers, top designers, consuls-general and CEOs of large business corporations, I heard on numerous occasions that many talented LGBTI people only want to settle in places with explicit diversity inclusion policies.

If Hong Kong is in any way seen to be “exclusive” or “unfriendly”, we stand little chance of remaining competitive. We would simply lose the multitude of talent

and skills LGBTI individuals can contribute.

But it's not all doom and gloom.

There is now undeniable public support for anti-discrimination legislation.

As our study in January highlights, 56% of the 1,005 participants surveyed were in favour of such legal protection.

What's more, the study indicated momentum towards greater acceptance and inclusion of the LGBTI community will continue to grow. A staggering 92% of youngsters aged 18 to 24 surveyed espoused strong support for legislation to protect fundamental rights of sexual minorities.

While it is often assumed that legal protection of LGBTI individuals stands at odds with religious views, the facts paint a different picture.

Close to half of the respondents (48.9%) in our survey with religious beliefs said there should be legislation to outlaw such discrimination.

Overseas experience tells us that religious institutions do not necessarily have to be a hindrance.

At a one-day conference "LGBTI rights and freedom of religion in Hong Kong and the European Union" organised by the European Union Office to Hong Kong and Macao, the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, the German Consulate of Hong Kong, and supported by the EOC on 28 November, I heard how some churches and religious figures in the Netherlands and Ireland became supporters of the movement.

The relationship between progressive values and religious views is much more nuanced than the simple dichotomy as it is often portrayed.

It is time for the Hong Kong government to recognise the changing tide of public opinion and give the green light to a public consultation on how to design anti-discrimination legislation.

We are only giving LGBTI individuals the same rights any other person enjoys.

As for the wider society, we need to stand side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder with those in the LGBTI community to make sure their fundamental human rights can be protected by law, and build an inclusive society which our next generation would be proud to live in.

**Professor Alfred C.M. Chan**  
**Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission**

(Note: A version of this article was originally published in The Standard on 7 December 2016)