

EO Files (February 2019)

“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”

Hong Kong’s universities have a sexual harassment problem, but don’t blame young people

Before I took the helm of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in 2016, I was a gerontology professor and had for years worked closely with undergraduate and postgraduate students on a daily basis. This experience tells me that young people in Hong Kong are in fact talented, wise, and passionate about shaping our society’s future.

Which is why I was dismayed by the findings of our latest study on sexual harassment of local university students: almost one in four students (23 per cent) were reportedly harassed on-campus, off-campus and/or online within the 12 months prior to our survey.

For sure, scandals about risqué games during orientation camps break out every now and again, but not until now were we able to paint a full picture of the problem. Our study covered nine universities, collected 14,442 questionnaires and engaged 28 students in one-on-one, in-depth interviews, along with university representatives via a focus group discussion.

While harassment usually took the form of sexual jokes or comments directed at the respondent (34.7 per cent) or at others in the respondent’s presence (38 per cent), it could escalate to inappropriate physical contact (20.2 per cent), sexually suggestive games (15.2 per cent), or even sexual advances despite rejection (5.1 per cent).

But let me say from the outset that there is no point in chewing out young people. For one thing, among those harassed on campus, 4.4 per cent said the perpetrators were professors, lecturers or tutors, with another 4.4 per cent pointing to non-academic staff. These numbers may not be striking, but the abuse of power is appalling.

All students desire good grades, which makes it all the more difficult to fend off advances from someone armed with the weaponry to influence their academic and career prospects. The implied message that one must succumb to sexual demands to get ahead in life is no less disturbing and carries far-reaching implications. In the succinct words of one interviewee – she was told to show more skin if she wanted a higher score – “What about in the workplace... am I supposed to sleep with

someone?”

There is no denying that the perpetrators in a majority of on-campus cases (72.7 per cent) were students from the same university. Still, I ask readers to withhold judgment; the issue runs deeper. Our study suggests that the prevalence of sexual harassment at local universities is symptomatic of a much larger problem: the failure – or virtual absence – of sex education in Hong Kong.

Schools in Hong Kong either treat sex as a taboo subject or limit classroom discussions to its biological aspects. As we made clear in a recent submission to the Education Bureau, such an approach is out of touch with reality. As adults, we all know that sex is much more than reproduction and birth control methods; it raises questions of what pleasure and intimacy mean, why we should respect others' bodies and feelings, and how some of us – LGBTI individuals and people with disabilities, for instance – are often misunderstood and mistreated.

What then fills the vacuum are cheesy soap operas and sexist Internet porn. No wonder young people in Hong Kong, by the time they enter university, tend to have developed warped conceptions of sex, stereotypical thinking about gender roles, and a lack of empathy towards minority groups. Our findings reflect this in manifold ways, with perpetrators misinterpreting consent (believing, for example, that “no means yes”), bystanders remaining silent or even blaming the victim, women being objectified, men assumed to be immune from harassment and LGBTI students and those with disabilities subject to higher rates of sexual harassment.

Clearly, we need a more robust curriculum at primary and secondary schools geared towards instilling the values of gender equality. It must be supported by concrete school measures, such as setting aside dedicated lesson hours and sending teachers to training sessions.

At the university level, raising awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment and how complaints can be lodged should be a priority. In fact, nearly a quarter of our respondents failed to identify four or more scenarios of sexual harassment; more than half (58.6 per cent) were unaware of the existing anti-sexual harassment policy at their universities. Among those who had been sexually harassed, merely 2.5 per cent lodged a complaint with the university. In other words, deficient knowledge of sexual harassment, coupled with a poorly publicised complaint handling mechanism, has led to a trend of underreporting sexual harassment.

The EOC is now lining up meetings with the officials of the nine universities to discuss implementation of the 17 recommendations in our report. These include appointing a top-level managerial staff member to oversee matters relating to sexual harassment and sex education; requiring each department and residential hall to assign a “gender focal point”, who advises colleagues on how to handle complaints; offering formal training and regular refreshers for complaint-handling staff; arranging compulsory training for all freshmen; and leveraging more modern forms of content that the younger generation actually enjoys, such as interactive modules and bite-sized videos on social media.

The last thing I want to see is society using our study as fodder to stigmatise university students. The problem is systemic, and our responsibility collective. No doubt it is up to young people to create the future, but it is up to us to see what is wrong at the present time, and to nurture a learning environment free from fear and harassment for the builders of tomorrow.

Professor Alfred CHAN Cheung-ming

Chairperson

Equal Opportunities Commission

(Note: A version of this article was published in *The South China Morning Post* on 4 February 2019.)