

EO Files (March 2010)

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

The Great Challenge

Ever since the change in its leadership, many people have been keeping an eye on the Equal Opportunities Commission to see what path it takes. I have often been asked about my vision for the EOC, as its new chairperson.

My answer has been: to be a defender and advocate of human rights and equal opportunities.

I have met more than 60 community groups since I assumed office last month, and I reiterated to them that the EOC takes its responsibility seriously. We will not condone discrimination: there must be a place for everyone in our society, and no one should be deprived of equal opportunities to realise his or her potential and aspirations.

I have taken an interest in the work of the EOC since it was established in 1996. It has put the concept of equal opportunities on the mental map of many in Hong Kong who want to advocate justice or seek justice for themselves.

Hong Kong has long offered refuge for many, with its quiet acceptance of political and social diversity. I have always been proud of this city, where I was born, raised, educated and where I built my career in the public service. I have always been proud of its people for their resilience and capacity for adapting to change. Yet I also understand that not everyone in Hong Kong enjoys the same opportunities and benefits the city offers.

Although Hong Kong has been enriched by the contributions of people coming from different places, some people are less tolerant and receptive of others who may look "unfamiliar" and act differently from themselves.

Our systems and physical structures may not always cater for those with special needs. Some families continue to live in dire poverty despite their struggle to break through barriers and discrimination.

Internationally and locally, there is a growing consensus that equal opportunity is an essential hallmark of any world-class city. To be such a place, Hong Kong needs to be

genuinely open and accommodating. Listening, respecting and supporting one another - these are the keys to a brighter future for all.

Every day, the EOC continues to see or hear about instances of discrimination. People are refused jobs, services or housing, and they feel that it may be due to their race, disabilities, gender, family status, sexual orientation or age.

We still hear that some job seekers are told bluntly: "There's no need for you to come for the job interview" when the employers find out about their disability or racial background.

We still receive an alarming number of complaints related to pregnancy discrimination, sexual harassment, dismissals after sick leave and accessibility problems.

The EOC has handled about 170,000 inquires and 10,000 complaints on discrimination matters since 1996. To date we have secured HK\$34 million in compensation through conciliation and an additional HK\$25 million through legal assistance (including damages awarded by the court or in out-of-court settlements) for the victims of discrimination on the grounds of sex, disability, family status or race.

In addition to our mechanisms of conciliation and legal assistance, we will also step up publicity and educational campaigns while expanding our stakeholder networks to promote the core values of equal opportunity. Every effort will be made to include these perspectives in the policymaking process, and in all policy areas, as systemic change can only occur when these issues are entrenched in the mainstream of public thought.

Accessibility to premises and services, non-discriminatory employment opportunities and practices, and effective education for all are some of the major areas of the EOC's concern.

In the absence of a human rights commission in Hong Kong, various groups who feel their rights are not adequately protected under the law have turned to the EOC to voice their grievances.

Although the EOC is only mandated to implement the existing four anti-discrimination laws, I feel it is the EOC's moral obligation to advocate for those facing other forms of discrimination, such as those of certain sexual orientation or

who must accept alarmingly low wages.

Despite my civil service background - which has raised some queries about my commitment to dealing with complaints involving the government - our future actions will show that the EOC will not hesitate to take a tough stance while discharging its duties, no matter who is the source of that discrimination.

Although the EOC is subvented by government funding, we have always maintained our independence and operated as an autonomous, statutory body. Impartiality is our guiding principle in discharging our duties.

Promoting equal opportunities for all is a cross-generational task but I am facing this enormous challenge with a strong commitment. I look forward to the support of the community: only through working together can we achieve an inclusive society where each person's unique identity is valued and embraced.

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Chairperson
Equal Opportunities Commission

(Note: This article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 30 March 2010.)

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