

EO Files (November 2014)

"THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief"

All Hong Kong citizens have a responsibility to build inclusive society

I refer to Giles Brennand's article in the South China Morning Post ("The Equal Opportunities Commission puts too much focus on rights and not enough on responsibilities", November 3). The article contains a number of mischaracterisations that merit clarification.

In reviewing the discrimination law, the commission is not trying to "create rights out of thin air". Rather, according to the Bill of Rights and the Basic Law, each person has intrinsic and universal rights, which deserve adequate protection. Such rights are also set out under international human rights instruments, which apply to Hong Kong.

Contrary to what Mr Brennand implied, the commission believes that the existence of human rights necessarily entails practical responsibilities, including safeguarding other people's rights.

Such responsibilities belong to everyone, from individuals to organisations, and are a vital part of one's obligations as a citizen. In short, we have a responsibility to each other to build an inclusive society. This coincides with the vision and mission of the commission.

We are, thus, not suggesting these responsibilities are the sole domain of the government, though it does have a key role in implementing and ensuring human rights within a social system. It would, however, be a stretch to think that families can entirely replace such a system.

After all, throughout Chinese history, a few prominent families sought only to protect their vested interests - much to the detriment of the masses left behind socially, economically, and politically, leading to numerous revolutions and uprisings.

What we need in Hong Kong is a system that is fair to all. Families do have a crucial part in its creation by instilling in children good moral values, including compassion and social justice.

These are not dissimilar to "traditional Chinese values" such as mutual respect, courtesy and filial piety.

Indeed, each culture has positive and negative elements. As an international city with a diverse population of various cultural backgrounds, it would make sense for Hong Kong to learn more about different traditions and experiences as we forge our own path.

It is also worth considering if viewing human rights through the binary of Asian versus Western values is constructive.

Not only does this overlook the universal nature of human rights, but it also disregards the considerable advancements made in Asia and other non-Western countries on this front. Surely, ignoring this evolution would not help our own progress.

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(Note: This Letter to the Editor was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 6 November 2014)