

**EO Files (March 2015)**

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

**Fight discrimination that robs Hong Kong's ethnic minorities of a sense of belonging**

*York Chow urges action to combat problems non-Chinese face every day to access vital services*

Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, observed around the world annually to raise awareness on combating racism. Last week, the Equal Opportunities Commission held a public event with RTHK to commemorate this important occasion. Indeed, as we enter the 50th year, since this day was first proclaimed in 1966, it is worth taking stock of our progress in Hong Kong.

There has been much dialogue on the need for adequate support to enable ethnic minorities to learn Chinese as a second or third language, without which their long-term job prospects will remain limited. In recognition of this, the Equal Opportunities Commission has named the issue one of our priority work areas over the next few years.

But a less-discussed, though no less pervasive, problem is the difficulties facing many ethnic minorities in accessing vital services in their everyday life, from housing to banking and health care. In fact, since the Race Discrimination Ordinance came into effect in 2009, the majority of the complaints the commission has received under this law have been related to the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Adequate housing is one of the most fundamental needs for a person. Yet for many from the ethnic minority communities, especially those who do not read and write Chinese or English fluently, finding a home continues to be a persistent concern, as applications for public rental housing must be made in writing. The language barrier also presents an issue as notices in buildings are sometimes provided in Chinese only, causing those ethnic minority tenants to be left out on essential information.

Those renting private flats also face significant hurdles. In a 2012 study we commissioned, South Asian respondents reported that property agents refused to help them, discouraged them from looking, or offered only

options that are less desirable to others. We have been informed of instances where the landlord pulled the offer or raised the price unreasonably after finding out that the prospective tenant was from an ethnic minority group. And leasing contracts are sometimes provided in Chinese only.

Foreign domestic workers have also reported facing discrimination in their housing estates, such as not being permitted to use the building's facilities, including the clubhouse or the swimming pool, even if they have a resident's card and are accompanying family members who are in their care.

Another frequently heard concern is related to banking services. Recently, there has been some media attention on the fact that many ethnic minorities are refused when trying to open bank accounts or applying for a credit card. They are often asked to provide more documentary evidence or subjected to more extensive questioning about their intent and background. The approval process can also take longer, which leaves the ethnic minority applicant stranded, sometimes for months, without the necessary financial services or funds.

Another major challenge is in accessing health services. Some ethnic minority patients only have basic knowledge of either English or Chinese, which means they may miss crucial health-related information when speaking to their doctor. Accompanying family or friends are often asked to interpret, but without medical interpretation training, the information that is passed on may be incomplete.

While medical interpretation services are available, they are not stationed at the clinic or hospital, and there is uncertainty about who has the authority to request their services. The confusion can significantly lengthen the waiting time for ethnic minority patients, particularly in the Emergency Room.

Hong Kong is a racially diverse society, and has historically been a refuge for people of different backgrounds. Yet many Hongkongers who have made this city their home and are positively contributing to our society continue to face prejudice and discrimination in the course of their daily lives. To repeatedly suffer these small indignities, day in and day out, inflicts real wounds on one's sense of belonging in a community. Such acts

have no place in our city.

We must look beyond legal compliance towards proactively cultivating inclusive values and understanding about different cultures. What is needed is an open attitude and willingness to reach across different traditions and languages. This should be nurtured from an early age.

Moreover, Hong Kong has to maintain its cosmopolitan nature and international outlook as a key factor of its success.

The government should lead the charge to advance racial integration, including in promoting inclusive values in schools. It should also ensure that everyone, irrespective of their race, has equal access to public services, and regularly review policies and practices, including providing training to frontline staff, to ensure they do not inadvertently discriminate on the basis of race.

Whatever our background, we all want the same things - to be treated with respect, to have a safe living environment, and to feel welcomed in this city that we all call home. As a cosmopolitan society, we surely can do better to enable all of us to pursue our dreams in Hong Kong.

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