

EO Files (March 2016)

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

Stand against racism

York Chow says amid rising intolerance, Hong Kong must renew its commitment to support racial equality

In 1966, the United Nations declared 21 March to be International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – a platform for communities around the world to reflect on their own battles against racism and steps forward. This year marks its 50th anniversary, which coincides with the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Equal Opportunities Commission. Indeed, this provides an opportune moment for Hong Kong to consider its progress and challenges in achieving racial equality.

Although there has been clear advancement over the years, not least with the passage of the Race Discrimination Ordinance in 2008, racial inequality is still entrenched in different facets of daily life.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that ethnic minority Hongkongers continue to face enormous barriers to equal opportunities, starting from an early age, which leaves them more vulnerable to intergenerational poverty.

In the Government’s report in December 2015, the poverty rate of South Asian households with children, after policy intervention, stood at 31 per cent, nearly double the comparable figure for overall households with children.

Analysis in 2015 by the Hong Kong Institute of Education also indicated that the poverty rate for South Asian families increased significantly from 2001 to 2011, even as it decreased slightly over the same period for Chinese families. The researchers linked the poverty situation of ethnic minority families specifically to problems of integration, including cultural and language barriers which leave many unable to access necessary support.

What is sorely needed is a comprehensive policy solution covering different domains, including education, employment and access to services. We have

consistently called for more targeted and multi-level support measures, starting from pre-primary stage, to assist ethnic minority children to learn Chinese, taking into account their specific needs as second- or third-language learners, and to widen their access to higher and tertiary qualifications.

The Government should hire more ethnic minority applicants into the civil service, to enable the viewpoints and needs of their communities to be integrated into policymaking and public service.

A stronger effort is needed to foster a truly bilingual environment, with both official languages of English and Chinese being used. This can facilitate the equal participation of ethnic minority Hongkongers, not to mention maintaining our competitiveness as an international city.

Concurrently, the Equal Opportunities Commission is working with the private sector to enhance access to culturally-sensitive services, including in areas such as banking or housing. To investigate the situation more systematically, last year we commissioned a new study on race discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services, which is currently ongoing. It is hoped that the findings can provide an evidence-based foundation for further action.

The Commission also considered related issues in the context of our comprehensive review of the existing anti-discrimination ordinances, about which the public was consulted in 2014.

In relation to education, the public's views were sought on removing the existing exceptions relating to medium of instruction in vocational training and education, given our concern that these exceptions may be too wide and may not comply with both local and international human rights obligations regarding language discrimination.

There is also a need to look at whether it would be appropriate to prohibit race discrimination in certain Government functions and exercise of powers, which would make the race-related protection consistent with that under other anti-discrimination ordinances.

We must also recognise that systemic inequality cannot be adequately addressed reactively, but requires proactive measures.

This is another key area examined in the law review: whether the Government and public bodies should have a proactive duty to eliminate discrimination and promote equality in all of their work. This would cover not only race, but also all other protected characteristics, and would help to bring Hong Kong in line with international developments and best practices.

During the 2014 public consultation, divergent responses were received, which we have carefully analysed along with other relevant factors, including our own operational experience and Hong Kong's local and international human rights obligations. We are in the final stages of putting together our recommendations for legislative reforms on all four anti-discrimination ordinances to the Government.

We believe these reforms will be vital to taking our city's equality framework to the next level and building a truly inclusive society. They would also be timely, given the increasing division in our society.

We are seeing xenophobia, intolerance, and unjust ethnic stereotypes evidently on the rise, sometimes fuelled by biased and sensationalistic media coverage, such as linking asylum seekers to increasing crime or conflating illegal immigrants with genuine protection claimants.

This is clearly contrary to our core values of diversity and inclusion. Throughout our history, talented individuals from all over the world, drawn to our openness and opportunities, have come to our city to make their homes. Many have been here for generations, making key contributions to our city's successes and growth – in business, the judiciary, the public sector, and various professions. They are Hongkongers, in every sense of the word.

Surely, what defines a "Hongkonger" is neither ethnicity nor circumstances, but the mutual love for this city and willingness to contribute to our shared future.

We need to banish the prejudicial attitudes and stereotypical assumptions that have stubbornly remained. Whatever our background, we all deserve equal respect and opportunity to reach our potential.

It is now half a century since the world took a stand together against racism. On this occasion, Hong Kong should unequivocally reiterate that race discrimination has no place in our community and our character, and put in place the measures that would ensure its elimination.

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