

EO Files (November 2017)

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

Why Hong Kong needs to start talking about sexual harassment

Alfred C.M. CHAN says with its conservative outlook, the city has remained a silent onlooker as the #MeToo campaign swept the globe. But sexual harassment, especially at work, is deep-rooted and only a joint effort can end it.

The “#MeToo” global social media movement, triggered by allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, generated little noise in this part of the world. A district councillor who shared her account of being sexually harassed with an online newspaper was even criticised for joining the “Me Too” conversation to gain publicity.

But then, sexual harassment has never been an easy topic to discuss. On the one hand, as a product of power imbalance, it instils fear in the victims, the powerless, who are often afraid to speak up and seek help. On the other, it involves the taboo-bound subject of sex that many prefer not to have to deal with. That also partly explains why Hong Kong, still quite conservative when it comes to talking about sex, has remained a silent onlooker in the “Me Too” movement.

But just because people feel uncomfortable talking about sexual harassment does not mean we should shelve the issue. In recent years, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has conducted a number of surveys to gauge the scale and severity of sexual harassment in various industries and sectors. The results have consistently shown that it is a deeply rooted problem. Data from the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women, an NGO, also points to a similar trend.

The women's rights group said it would mark the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, on November 25, with a #MeTooHK campaign, as a continuation of the global #MeToo movement. We are glad that Hong Kong is having its own dialogue about sexual harassment, as there is a lack of understanding about this in our society.

In Hong Kong, sexual harassment and victimisation resulting from it are unlawful under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, which protects both women and men. Being the public body responsible for implementing the four anti-discrimination laws, the EOC handles inquiries and complaints about sexual harassment. Last year, we received

over 100 such complaints, and aimed to resolve them through conciliation or legal proceedings.

To raise awareness, the EOC provides training for establishments where sexual harassment is more common, that is, companies and schools. This strategy is supported by complaint statistics which suggests that most cases are employment-related.

Establishments, be it companies, schools, shops, restaurants or others, play a crucial role in protecting staff, students or service users from sexual harassment. If a company takes internal complaints seriously and duly punishes the perpetrators, instead of blaming the victims or allowing the perpetrators to take revenge on them, people would think twice before they commit such acts.

Recognising the importance of making the top management aware of their responsibilities, the EOC holds seminars for management-level staff in sectors including education, sport and social service, and helps them put in place policies to properly handle internal sexual harassment incidents.

If we are to effectively stop sexual harassment, we need a joint effort. While businesses have the moral and legal obligation to keep sexual harassment out, NGOs, the media and academia can play a part in generating a social dialogue, and the government and public bodies need to devise social policies to promote gender equality and drive systemic changes.

Once people stop normalising sexual harassment and start seeing it as unacceptable behaviour, and condemn rather than condone, we will see the cultural shift we hope for. We not only have to say “Me Too”, but also “I Do” – and make an active effort to kick sexual harassment out of our community.

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