

**EO Files (May 2021)**

## **RTHK 3 Letter to Hong Kong**

Dear fellow Hongkongers,

The Equal Opportunities Commission was established in 1996 with the vision to create a pluralistic and inclusive society free from discrimination.

As we celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, allow me to invite you on a walk down memory lane this morning to reflect on some of the milestones in the EOC's history.

When it comes to promoting equal opportunities, the EOC has always walked the talk, going beyond finger-pointing to make tangible and meaningful change. In 2010, we released the report of a formal investigation into the accessibility of 60 premises owned or managed by Government departments and the Housing Authority, among other bodies. The investigation revealed a lack of barrier-free access to these premises, which put people with disabilities at a clear disadvantage. This eventually led the Government to roll out a HK\$1.3-billion retrofitting programme covering 3,500 premises and facilities.

Besides paving the way for more inclusive public policies, the EOC has been a vocal advocate of law reform, as prevailing trends of discrimination and harassment continue to unveil gaps in the legislation. In 2016, we submitted over 70 recommendations to the Government based on a comprehensive review of the anti-discrimination ordinances. The outcome has been highly encouraging: the Government's bill to implement eight of our recommended amendments was passed unanimously by the Legislative Council in June last year, and follow-up work on the remaining recommendations is already underway.

Such legislative developments can carry a significant and positive impact on the everyday life of Hongkongers. For instance, thanks to amendments to the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, effective from the 19<sup>th</sup> of June this year, legal redress will be available for women who face breastfeeding discrimination and harassment in the course of employment, using facilities, receiving goods and services, and in other areas of public life specified by the law.

In fact, the EOC itself has also been evolving to address an ever-expanding range of pressing issues relating to discrimination. In 2015, we set up our Ethnic Minorities Unit to devote dedicated resources to advancing equal opportunity for non-Chinese communities in Hong Kong. From school teachers and healthcare workers to estate agents and business owners, the Unit delivers cultural sensitivity training to a variety of stakeholders to ensure that a racially inclusive culture can take root in education, employment, housing and the provision of goods, services and facilities. In particular, the Racial Diversity and Inclusion Charter for Employers, launched by the Unit in 2018 to promote best practices, now boasts 170 signatories. We have also published a series of reports on how the Education Bureau can enhance its support for non-Chinese-speaking students, who deserve a level playing field and an equal chance to fully realise their potential, both for their development and the future of our city.

Indeed, the EOC has never stopped improving and reinventing itself to better serve the local community. Following consultation with a wide spectrum of civil society groups and a review of our complaint-handling procedure between 2017 and 2018, the EOC put in place a victim-centric approach and a series of enhancement measures, such as streamlining case classification and the assignment of officers, so as to minimise the distress complainants may feel when recounting their experience to us. To further safeguard victims' interests, we found it pivotal to synergise the work of our two law enforcement divisions, namely the Complaint Services Division and Legal Service Division. We therefore established a new position in 2020 to oversee both divisions.

Meanwhile, this year saw the birth of another new unit in the EOC, dedicated to combatting sexual harassment in Hong Kong. In the past, the EOC has conducted multiple surveys about sexual harassment in education, sports and religious organisations, while hosting seminars and workshops to facilitate the adoption of preventive measures. Notably, our research in 2020 on National Sports Organisations in Hong Kong found that 90% of them had developed a written anti-sexual harassment policy and/or code of conduct for coaches and instructors, up from 35% in 2018. Yet, it has also become obvious across different sectors that there may be delayed or under-reporting among victims, and that the Sex Discrimination Ordinance may not be adequately equipped to address certain scenarios of sexual harassment. The new Unit was created to tackle precisely these problems. It operates a hotline to provide information on relevant laws,

advice on where to lodge complaints and seek redress, as well as referral to counselling and therapy services when needed. It has also been tasked with a holistic review of the current legal regime.

Milestones aside, the EOC is aware that our mission to eliminate discrimination has become an increasingly daunting challenge amid the intensifying polarisation of society and the general decline of trust in public institutions.

Every now and then, our impartiality and professionalism have come under unwarranted attacks from across the political spectrum. I would like to take this opportunity to reassure our listeners that the EOC has and will always be an independent and vocal defender of the right to equality. The facts speak for themselves. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the EOC has called out inaccuracies and delays in translation of official information into languages commonly spoken by ethnic minority members of our society. We have spoken up against culturally insensitive food arrangements for halal-observing Muslims placed under quarantine. Just recently, we urged the Government and employers to be careful not to impose blanket vaccination orders, since they are likely to have a disproportionately negative impact on pregnant women and people with certain pre-existing illnesses who are not suited for vaccination.

Looking beyond the pandemic, we believe a lot more remains to be done – from shattering the glass ceiling facing women and destigmatising mental health issues to helping non-Chinese-speaking students make a better transition from school to work. The EOC is also committed to advocating to the Government to expand the list of protected characteristics under the anti-discrimination law, so that new immigrants, LGBT people and other vulnerable communities can seek legal redress when subjected to undue discrimination.

This hope for further progress, this roadmap of change – it will never be realised without support from all in society. I do believe that a spirit of solidarity and collaboration has always been here in Hong Kong: when the EOC launched the inaugural edition of its Equal Opportunity Employer Recognition Scheme last year, over 400 organisations applied. And just two days ago, we held a ceremony to present awards to 14 of them, who demonstrated a track record of promoting equal opportunities for women and men, people with disabilities, people with family responsibilities, as well as ethnic minorities in the workplace. 10 SMEs also won recognition at the ceremony.

As the EOC turns 25 years old, I earnestly wish that you will see us for what we are – passionate but professional, committed but impartial. On that note, we look forward to making more milestones with you on our quest for a just and equal Hong Kong.

Ricky CHU Man-kin  
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

(Note: The letter was broadcast on [RTHK3](#) on 16 May 2021)