

Names and some of the details of conciliated cases have been changed to protect privacy.

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Introduction

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) is a statutory body set up in 1996 to implement the four anti-discrimination legislation in Hong Kong, namely the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO), the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FSDO) and the Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO).

These ordinances protect against discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status, pregnancy, disability, family status, and race. Our mission is to eliminate discrimination and foster an inclusive society in which all individuals are treated with respect and dignity.

The EOC has a number of functions. These include undertaking investigation; conciliating complaints; providing litigation support; promoting equal opportunities through public education and training; and conducting research and advocating for policy changes on issues relevant to discrimination and equal opportunities.

Upon receiving a complaint, the EOC investigates into the matter and, if possible, attempt as an impartial facilitator to encourage a voluntary settlement between the disputing parties. In the period since our establishment in September 1996 until June 2012, the Commission received 11,252 complaints, half of which fell under the DDO, followed closely by the SDO (45%), FSDO (4%), and RDO (1%). The EOC has achieved an overall conciliation rate of 69%. Settlement terms vary from case to case, and can include an apology, changes in policies and practices, and monetary compensation.

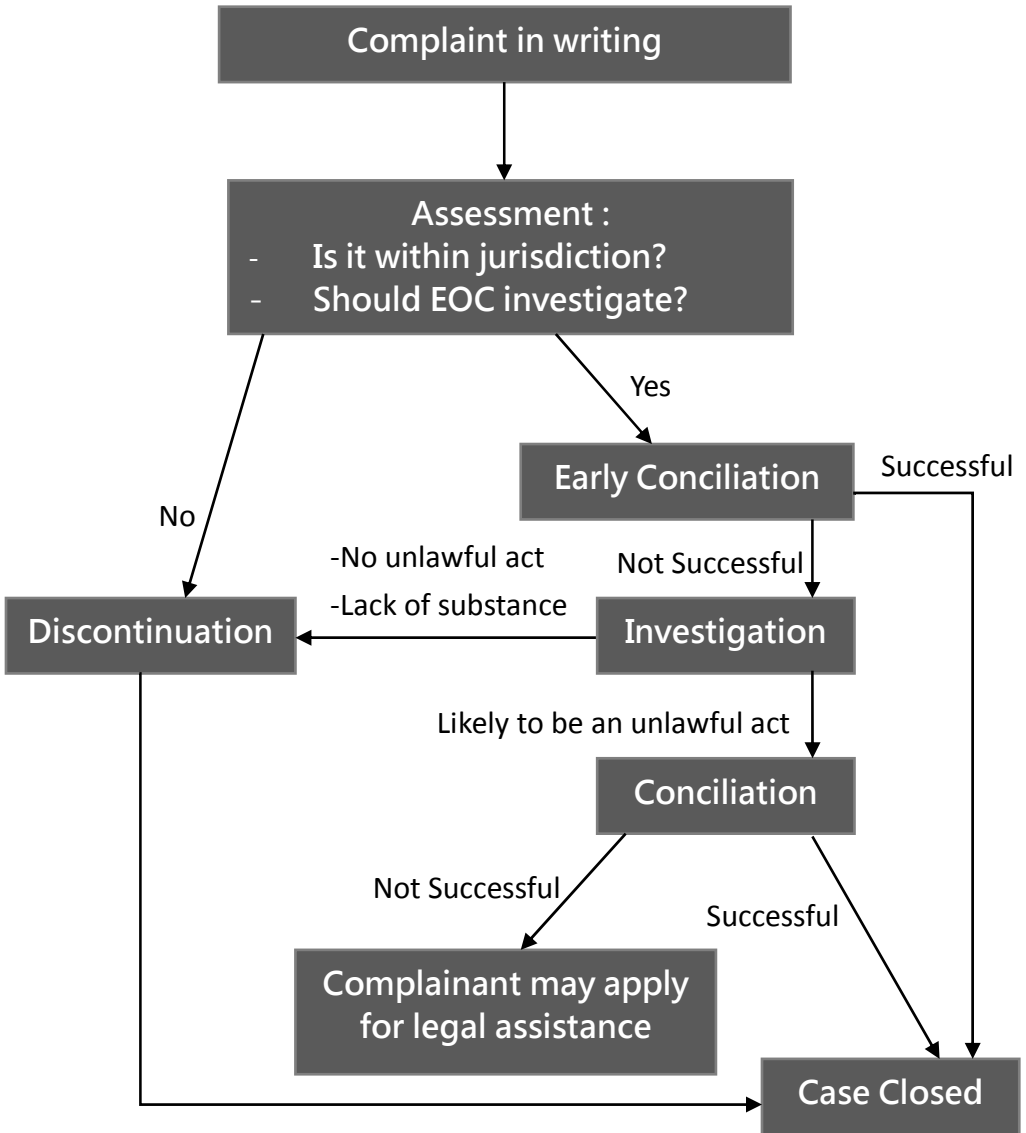
If conciliation fails, the complainant can apply to the EOC for legal assistance to take the case to the District Court. The Commission grants legal assistance for a number of reasons, including whether the case raises a question of principle and the level of complexity in a case.

In producing this book, the EOC's aims are multi-fold. First, by discussing the typical discrimination cases, the Commission hopes to reach those who have faced similar situations and urge them to seek redress. The cases can also provide a useful platform for employers and service providers to better recognise their legal responsibilities. Additionally, the cases may serve to clarify the day-to-day application of the anti-discrimination ordinances and widen the awareness of everyone's rights and responsibilities.

Second, the cases illustrate how the Commission approaches and handles complaints. The EOC is dedicated to addressing the public's need for transparency in our work. It is our hope that, the following cases will provide a clearer understanding the EOC's complaint handling process and considerations.

Finally, the EOC hopes the following cases concretely demonstrate the impact that our work has had on creating a more equitable society. Discrimination is an issue that affects all Hongkongers. With your help and awareness, we can work together to achieve a fairer and better city for all.

Lodging a Complaint with the EOC (Flow Chart)



Conciliated Cases

Cracking the Dress Code (Sex Discrimination)

In Hong Kong's first legal challenge to sex discrimination related to work attires, the EOC sought to establish a precedent regarding the application of dress codes between men and women in the workplace and question the stereotypical thinking on gender roles underlying such rules. Subsequently, the case was settled out of court.

◆ **The Complaint**

Jennifer was employed as a teacher at a secondary school. At the first staff meeting before the school year commenced, the school principal announced that all female teachers were required to wear a dress or a skirt to work.

Jennifer reported to the school in a knit top and dress pants on the first school day. She was summoned by the principal for her attire, but the principal later agreed that Jennifer could wear pant suits if she would not wear a dress or a skirt. Despite this agreement, Jennifer was repeatedly criticised for not wearing a dress or a skirt, sometimes even in front of students. Meanwhile, male teachers were not obliged to wear any particular type of clothing apart from the ban on t-shirts and jeans. Jennifer complained that male teachers were allowed to wear less formal pants, and they were not required to put on a jacket.

Jennifer believed the school had discriminated against her because the school unnecessarily restricted her choice of work wear while the male teachers were not subjected to corresponding requirements. Feeling humiliated, Jennifer lodged a complaint of sex discrimination against the school with the EOC.

✓ **What the EOC did**

Upon receiving the complaint, the EOC case officer investigated into the matter and tried to facilitate a settlement by way of conciliation. However, this attempt was unsuccessful. The EOC later granted legal assistance in this case on the basis that the case raises a question of sex discrimination in the field of employment, where a restriction affects members of one gender less favourably than members of the other gender.

Under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, it is unlawful for an employer to treat a person less favourably than another person in comparable circumstances because of a person's sex. In this case, female teachers were subjected to a stricter dress code than male teachers, to their detriment. Any dress code policy which requires members of both sexes to dress in a comparable standard of smartness and conventionality should be reasonable and necessary according to the nature of the job; it should also be applied in an even-handed manner between both sexes.

After a writ was issued, the school agreed to settle the matter by giving an apology and monetary payment to Jennifer. The school also undertook to review its dress code.

Points to Note:

- While the anti-discrimination ordinance does not explicitly state that dress codes are unlawful, employers should avoid setting dress codes that may inadvertently discriminate due to gender, pregnancy, disability or race. Rules and standards should be based on the requirement of the job, not arbitrarily imposed based on stereotypical assumptions.
- Employers should use sensitivity when considering exemptions for people with special needs due to their disabilities or religious backgrounds.
- As a good practice, employers should review the code periodically in order to take into account changing social conventions.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Good Management Practice Series on Dress and Appearance Codes.



Being Pregnant is not a Crime (Pregnancy Discrimination)

Pregnancy discrimination constitutes the majority of complaints received under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, with the discriminatory act often taking the form of a dismissal upon the employee's return from maternity leave.

◆ **The Complaint**

Sarah worked as a Manager at a manufacturing company for more than 12 years. She enjoyed a good working relationship with everyone at the office and never faced any problem with the management during her service. However, she was dismissed from her job when she returned from maternity leave.

When she confronted her boss about the dismissal, he told her that it was only because of the economic downturn and it had nothing to do with her pregnancy. Sarah was indignant and felt the dismissal was due to her pregnancy. She also recalled that her boss had commented that she looked like a pig when she was pregnant.

Even though she was upset, she offered to work for a lower salary if the dismissal was because of economic reasons. But her boss refused to accept it. Another colleague offered to resign and let Sarah have her position, but the boss refused the proposal. When both the offers were declined, another of Sarah's colleagues suggested to her boss that the company could consider reducing the salary of all staff. However, the boss refused this suggestion too.

Sarah later lodged a complaint of pregnancy discrimination against the company with the EOC.

✓ **What the EOC did**

Upon receiving the complaint, the EOC case officer contacted the company and informed them about the complaint and explained the provisions of discrimination against pregnant women in employment field under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO).

The SDO makes it unlawful for an employer to subject a woman to a disadvantage or dismiss her on the ground of her pregnancy (SDO section 8). While the dismissal of employees during their pregnancy may be an obvious form of discrimination, the dismissal of women upon their return from maternity leave is less obvious. However, if it is clear that the employee would not have been dismissed had she not been pregnant and gone on maternity leave, then the dismissal may be unlawful and a complaint may be lodged.

Both parties agreed for early conciliation and the case was settled after the company agreed to pay one year's salary to Sarah.

Points to Note:

- The protection of the SDO extends beyond the period of pregnancy and covers both the recruitment stage as well as after maternity leave. The main consideration is not “when” the employee is dismissed (i.e. during the period of pregnancy and maternity leave), but “why.” If pregnancy was a reason for the unfavourable treatment, the act may be unlawful.
- Pregnancy discrimination can take other forms of unfavourable treatment apart from dismissal, and may include refusal to grant training or promotion opportunities, or less salary increase.
- Employers should adopt a set of job related and non-discriminatory criteria for recruitment, promotion, and dismissal.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's publication, "Pregnancy Discrimination."



Power Imbalance (Sexual Harassment)

Sexual harassment is a common complaint received under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. Unlawful acts include both unwelcome person-to-person conducts of a sexual nature and a sexually-hostile environment.

◆ **The Complaint**

Carol never imagined that, after ten years, she would leave her job at a trading company this way. "My performance was consistently good and I was promoted three years ago. My job required me to engage in social activities outside the office and overseas business trips with my boss, Mr. Cheung. Mr. Cheung frequently asked me to sit next to him, and he took every opportunity to touch me. He even described the shape of my body in front of the others. I gave him hostile looks and it should be obvious to him that his behaviour was totally unwelcome. I avoided seeing him, but he threatened to demote me if I did not talk to him face to face," said Carol.

Distressed and suffering from insomnia, Carol could not concentrate on her work. Her complaint to the Personnel Department was ignored. She then sought help from a senior manager, who promised to transfer her to a post at a subsidiary which was similar to her present job. However, she was offered a junior post with less pay. She eventually resigned.

✓ **What the EOC did**

Carol lodged a complaint with the EOC against her boss, Mr. Cheung, for sexual harassment, and against the company for (a) victimizing her and (b) being vicariously liable for the unlawful act of its employee.

The EOC's case officer explained to Carol the complaint handling and conciliation procedures. The provisions of the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) were also explained to Mr. Cheung and the company. Under the SDO, sexual harassment includes any unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature which a reasonable person regards as offensive, humiliating or intimidation. Acts of sexual harassment may be direct or indirect, physical or verbal, and can include indecent or suggestive remarks or inappropriate touching.

After rounds of negotiations, the parties agreed to early conciliation. The trading company agreed to give Carol a work reference letter and a monetary payment approximately equal to her three years' salary. Although Mr. Cheung stressed he never had any intention of offending Carol, he agreed to apologise in writing.

An employer is also vicariously liable for unlawful sexual harassment acts committed by employees in the course of their employment, whether with or without the employer's knowledge or approval of such behaviour. It is also unlawful for employers to victimize a person, such as treating a person less favourably because he or she has lodged a discrimination complaint.

Points to Note:

- As we are aware that sexual harassment often happens in isolation, the EOC considers all circumstances and information provided by the complainant, even in the absence of concrete evidence, in our investigation.
- The SDO provides protection against unlawful acts in the course of employment even if they occurred outside of Hong Kong, as long as the employee does his/her work wholly or mainly in Hong Kong.
- Intent to discriminate or harass is irrelevant. Unintended acts of a sexual nature, such as jokes, may still be unlawful under the SDO.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Know Your Rights Series on Sexual Harassment.



From Sick to Sacked (Disability Discrimination)

The largest number of complaints received under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) is related to sick leave. Discriminatory acts can take many forms, including dismissal, poor performance review, limiting access to training opportunities, and refusal to grant salary increase.

◆ **The Complaint**

Steve, a property management assistant, had been off sick for two months last year due to colon cancer. After a series of medical treatments, he fully recovered and returned to work.

"I had been in my job for five years. My performance had never been a concern until I returned to work from sick leave," said Steve, who found himself treated unfairly by his employer. "I found out my supervisor had rated me "satisfactory" in my performance review, but higher up, the senior manager downgraded the rating without notifying me. As a consequence, I was not given a year-end bonus, and shortly afterwards, they even made me redundant."

He continued, "They had no fair reason for treating me like this. What was more shocking was when I found out later that the only reason they lowered my rating was because of my long absence from work. Redundancy was the only excuse they could think of to get rid of me." Steve lodged a complaint with the EOC against his employer for disability discrimination.

✓ **What the EOC did**

The EOC investigator looked into the complaint and explained to both parties the provisions of the anti-discrimination legislation.

Under the DDO, it is unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a person with a disability or sickness by dismissing that person. When an employee's disability hinders his/her capacity to perform the job duties, consideration of reasonable accommodation on the employer's part is warranted, unless that employee is unable to carry out the inherent requirements of the job even when provided with such accommodation, or if such accommodation would cause the employer unjustifiable hardship.

The employer admitted that Steve's appraisal score was adjusted downwards because of his lengthy sick leave, but they insisted that the dismissal was solely due to the realignment of work duties. However, the EOC's investigation revealed that the employer had hired someone else to replace Steve soon after he left.

The two parties agreed to proceed to conciliation in order to resolve the dispute. The matter was settled with the employer agreeing to give monetary payment and provide a good reference letter to Steve.

Points to Note:

- Disability-related absence is often required by employees in order to recuperate from illnesses and disabilities. Employers should balance between the accommodation of such needs with their operational requirements.
- At times, the provision of accommodations may cause the employer unjustifiable hardship. In determining what constitutes “unjustifiable hardship”, all relevant circumstances of the case will be taken into account, including the reasonableness of the accommodation sought and the financial resources of the employer vis-à-vis the estimated expenditure of the accommodation. The burden of proof is on the employer to make out this defence if so claimed.
- Training, recruitment, and redundancy exercises should be carried out fairly with the use of consistent and non-discriminatory criteria, with accompanying reasons for each selection.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Code of Practice on Employment under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance

A Child's Struggle for a School Place (Disability Discrimination)

The EOC believes every child should have equal access to quality education. The right to equal education opportunity is protected under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO).

◆ **The Complaint**

Liza is an 11-year old student with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which impairs her ability to concentrate. Her educational needs were made known to ABC primary school upon her admission. At the beginning of the school term, all Primary 6 pupils, including Liza, were asked to pay a deposit to secure a school place to advance to Form 1 via the "through train" mode, which allows secondary schools to admit all Primary 6 pupils of their linked primary schools.

Towards the end of the school year, however, the primary school asked Liza to withdraw her application for admission to Form 1 of the linked secondary school or provide an updated assessment report on Liza's disorder within a few weeks. Liza's parents were also required to guarantee that they would follow all the recommendations in the updated report before the linked secondary school could consider admitting Liza.

Shocked by the news, Liza's parents had a meeting with the Headmaster of ABC primary school, during which they explained to the school that it would be impossible to produce the assessment results within such a short period of time as a report

always took a few months to complete. They pleaded with the school to give Liza an equal education opportunity, but to no avail. Frustrated and deeply concerned for their daughter's future, the parents lodged a complaint with the EOC against the school for discriminating against Liza due to her learning disability.

✓ **What the EOC did**

The EOC case officer explained the EOC's complaint handling procedures as well as the legal provisions of the DDO in relation to the field of education.

Under the DDO, it is unlawful for educational establishments to discriminate against a person with a disability. Reasonable accommodation should be provided unless such a provision would impose unjustifiable hardship on the institution. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that persons with disabilities, like other students, have equal access to quality education.

Both parties were willing to resolve the matter through early conciliation. Upon the request of Liza's parents, the ABC primary school agreed to provide an apology letter to the parents, give monetary payment and review the admission policy and procedures.

Points to Note:

- Many teachers have limited experience or training in working with students with special needs. More resources and training are required to enable teachers to support the different learning needs of their students.
- Children with ADHD are often perceived as misbehaving, due to the fact that there is limited public awareness about the disability. In a 2010 EOC survey, over half of respondents disagreed that integrated education was preferred to special schools. Of these, 80% felt that students in integrated schools would not know how to respond when classmates with disabilities require assistance.
- Students with disabilities often face harassment and bullying in their schools. The DDO prohibits harassment in educational establishments, including harassment of students with disabilities by other students.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Disability & Education Series and the Code of Practice on Education under the DDO



Discriminatory Seating Arrangement (Disability Discrimination)

Complaints involving the provision of goods, facilities and services under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) remain common and may stem from stereotypical thinking about people with disability combined with service providers' liability concerns.

◆ The Complaint

Mr. Lee is blind. He was travelling with his friends, some of whom also have visual impairment. They took a flight to and from Hong Kong and requested the check-in staff to give them seats together so that the ones without visual impairment could offer help to those with visual impairment. However, after they boarded the plane, the cabin crew requested all those with visual impairment to change their seats and sit next to the windows without giving any reasons. Mr. Lee and his friends were then scattered during the flight and the visually impaired passengers were left alone.

Mr. Lee was upset and frustrated. He felt that he and his friends were treated unfairly because they were deprived of their right to sit together due to their visual impairment, leaving some of them unaccompanied. Later, Mr. Lee lodged a complaint of disability discrimination against the airline with the EOC.

✓ What the EOC did

Upon receiving the complaint, the EOC's case officer contacted both Mr. Lee and the airline. Under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, it is unlawful to discriminate against a person with

disability in the terms or conditions on which to use the services and facilities. People with visual impairment have the same rights as those without impairment to choose their companion and seats during flights, subject to the availability of seats. In this case, the airline, being the service provider, should have ensured that the policies they implemented would not result in less favourable treatment for customers with disabilities.

During the conciliation meeting, the airline representative said that the concerned staff made the changes because he thought it was the requirement under the Civil Aviation Department (CAD)'s guideline on passenger safety, but the representative admitted that that "window seat arrangement" for persons with visual impairment was not specified in the guideline and it was the company's own interpretation.

Both parties opted for early conciliation and the airline agreed to offer a few short trip air tickets for free to the affected passengers. The case was settled amicably.



Points to Note:

- Stereotypical assumptions about the ability of people with disability to lead fulfilling, independent lives remain common, leading to discriminatory attitudes and acts. In the EOC's 2010 survey, almost one in three respondents perceived that people with visceral disability would not be able to lead a happy and fulfilling life even if treatment was received.
- Advancement in assistive technology has provided a higher level of independence for people with disability to participate in daily activities as well as created a market of consumers with disability. Businesses should not ignore people with disability as both potential talents and customers.
- It would be advisable for service providers to provide sensitivity training to staff who deal with people with different needs. This could also help to open up more business opportunities and avoid potential legal problems in the long run.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's resource webpage on disability issues, [A Barrier-free Life](#).

A Long Battle for Dignified Access (Disability Discrimination)

Given Hong Kong's ageing population, accessibility is everyone's issue. Accessibility is a common non-employment related complaint received under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO).

◆ **The Complaint**

Tina uses a wheelchair as a result of cerebral palsy and global developmental delay. Now in her 20s, she has resided in the building since birth.

Each time Tina entered or exited the building, her elderly mother must pull both her and her wheelchair up/down five steps. Tina's mother had made requests to the Incorporated Owners (IO) of the building in writing for accessible facilities for wheelchair users. Although the building had undergone renovations twice, her mother received no response from the IO regarding her requests.

Tina's mother complained to the EOC, requesting a ramp or a stair-lift.

✓ **What the EOC did**

Under the DDO, it is unlawful to discriminate against persons with disabilities in relation to the provision of means of access to a premise. Accessible facilities, such as access ramps, also benefit other residents, such as baby pram users or those who use wheelchairs due to aging.

The EOC case officer, after investigation, attempted to facilitate conciliation between the parties, but was unsuccessful. The IO later installed a stair-climber at the building's entrance. However, the stair-climber was not suitable for Tina's needs. On three separate occasions she tried the stair-climber, she found it to be, respectively, out of battery, out of order, and unsuitable due to its backward tilt and potential for loss of balance.

Tina's mother sought technical advice, and was told that a ramp or a stair-lift would also be a feasible solution which might be better than a stair-climber in providing access. Tina and her mother then requested legal assistance from the EOC, which was granted.

The trial was scheduled for mid-2011. During the pre-trial review hearing, the IO consented to install a ramp or stair-lift within the agreed timeframe. The case was thus settled.



Points to Note:

- It is important to endeavour to address the real needs of all users, including people with disability, for independent, unassisted and barrier-free means of access as well as to ensure that any facility is actually useable. In many instances, physical barriers continue to exist even in places where measures have seemingly been taken to improve access features.
- Independent access to premises should be provided, unless such provisions would cause unjustifiable hardship to facility managers or owners. Reasonable accommodation refers to any modification or adjustment to the environment that makes it possible for an individual with disability to enjoy equal access.
- The EOC advocates the mainstreaming of Universal Design concepts. Everyone stands to gain from environments and products that are planned, with respect to individual human needs, to be usable by all people regardless of their age and disability to the greatest extent possible, without requiring expensive adaptation or specialized design in later years.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Formal Investigation Report: Accessibility in Publicly Accessible Premises.

Family or Job First (Family Status Discrimination)

We all have a responsibility to care for our family. But long working hours, a near absence of family-friendly work arrangements, and prevalent gender stereotypes mean that work-family balance remains difficult for many Hong Kong workers.

◆ **The Complaint**

Mrs. Ng, an executive at a financial institution, had to rush her son to a hospital late one night. He was diagnosed with acute respiratory disease and was immediately admitted given his critical condition.

Early the next morning, Mrs. Ng informed her supervisor and colleagues of her absence from work to take care of her son. Later in the day, the doctors informed her that her son needed to stay in the hospital for a few more days. She called her supervisor in the evening to request for another day off, but he curtly asked her whether she wanted her job or her family.

When Mrs. Ng went to work the next day she was asked to go to the conference room where her supervisor chided her. Two hours later, she received a phone call from the hospital asking her to see the doctor immediately as her son's condition had deteriorated. She requested her supervisor for an urgent leave but was denied. Left with no choice, she handed in her resignation and left.

Mrs. Ng later lodged a complaint with the EOC against the supervisor for discriminating against her and the company for being vicariously liable for the act of her superior.

✓ **What the EOC did**

Upon receiving the letter from Mrs. Ng, the EOC's case officer notified the company about the complaint.

The Family Status Discrimination Ordinance makes it unlawful for a person or an organization to discriminate against any individual on the basis of his/her family status, defined as a person's responsibility to take care of an immediate family member—a person related by blood, marriage, adoption or affinity. By denying Mrs. Ng an urgent leave despite her responsibility to look after her son, whom the law describes as her relative by blood, the company likely discriminated against her.

Both parties agreed for early conciliation and an agreement was reached. As requested by Mrs. Ng, the company provided a reference letter for her and also waived the payment, which she was supposed to make, in lieu of the notice period for leaving employment. Mrs. Ng decided not to pursue a case against her supervisor since he left the job after she filed a complaint with the EOC.

Points to Note:

- In considering family status, an operative factor concerns “the responsibility of care”, defined generally as a specific relationship of being usually responsible for the care of such a person (an immediate family member).
- Family-friendly employment policy can help to retain talent, and build staff morale. Research from Community Business, a non-governmental organization, has shown that nearly 40 percent of respondents would leave their current job for better work-life balance.
- Employers are vicariously responsible for the discriminatory acts of their employees, done in the course of their employment, whether or not these were done with the employer's knowledge or approval, unless the employer has taken reasonably practicable steps to prevent such acts from occurring. The EOC encourages employers to formulate a clear policy to eliminate discrimination on the ground of family status in the workplace.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Code of Practice on Employment under the FSDO.

Culturally Sensitive Enough? (Race Discrimination)

Since the Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) came into effect in 2009, the majority of complaints received by the EOC were related to the provision of goods, facilities and services.

◆ **The Complaint**

Laila is a Muslim originally from Pakistan. She enjoyed swimming in her neighbourhood pool. Due to her religious customs, Laila preferred to cover up the curves of her body. Therefore, when swimming, she wore a clean T-shirt and long pants (covering the knees) on top of her swimsuit. She had always worn such an outfit at her local pool without a problem.

However, one day, she was stopped by a pool staff member for her attire. She alleged that she had seen other Chinese women in a very similar type of outfit using the facility. Laila felt she was unfairly treated and decided to lodge a complaint of race discrimination with the EOC against the facility management.

✓ **What the EOC did**

The EOC case officer contacted the pool's facility manager and explained to them the provisions of the RDO.

Under Section 27 of the RDO, it is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the ground of race when providing goods, facilities and services. While the RDO does not apply to discrimination on the ground of religion, some requirements or conditions relating to religion may result in indirect discrimination against certain

racial groups, in which case the RDO may apply. In this case, many female Muslims dress modestly according to their religious customs, which was the reason Laila wished to wear a T-shirt and pants over her swimsuit. If the swimming pool had a policy against wearing such attire, it may be discriminatory against Muslims and indirectly against Pakistanis, most of whom are Muslims, and the RDO would be applicable.

The facility management denied the allegation of race discrimination and explained that this type of clothing for swimming was actually allowed according to their policy. The facility manager claimed the incident might have arisen from a misunderstanding between Laila and the swimming pool staff about whether Laila had worn a bathing suit underneath her T-shirt.

Both parties agreed to settle the matter through conciliation. The concerned staff agreed to apologize to Laila for creating unpleasant sentiments for her. Confirmation was also given by the swimming pool's management that any person wearing a loose T-shirt and loose pants (covering the knees) over their swimsuit are permitted to use the swimming pool.

Points to Note:

- Under the law, intent to discriminate is irrelevant. Both direct and indirect racially discriminatory acts which arise from cultural insensitivity, even without the intention to discriminate, may still be unlawful.
- Employers may be, under the RDO, vicariously responsible for any discriminatory act done by their employees in the course of their employment, even if the employer did not know or did not approve of what the employee has done. Employers are encouraged to avoid inadvertent discrimination by providing their employees, especially those who have customer-facing responsibilities, with the knowledge and skills to sensitively deal with different customer groups.
- The EOC encourages providers of goods, facilities and services to cater for a diverse range of customers, as this not only promotes racial harmony, but also broadens business opportunities.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's Code of Practice on Employment under the RDO.

Unlawful Act of Inciting Hatred Through the Internet (Race Vilification)

The internet and social media have become popular platforms for self-expression, but care should be taken to guard against any action which may cause racial hatred or discord.

◆ **The Complaint**

Lana, a national of a Southeast Asian country, came across racially derogatory and demeaning remarks, such as “swine” and “meaner than dogs”, targeted at people of her nationality while surfing a discussion forum on a website.

Lana felt humiliated and lodged a complaint of race discrimination against the website company with the EOC, as the company had allowed its members to post the remarks which could incite hatred towards people of her race.

✓ **What the EOC did**

The EOC case officer investigated into the matter and sent a letter to the website company informing it about the complaint.

Under S45 of the RDO on the subject of vilification, it is unlawful for a person (in this case the writer who has written and posted the derogatory remarks), by any activity in public, to incite hatred towards, serious contempt for, or severe ridicule of, another person or members of a class of persons on the ground of the race of the person or members of the class of persons.

Under S48 of the RDO, the website company could be seen as aiding the unlawful act if it allowed its members to post such remarks.

The company replied that its forum master was unaware of the derogatory remarks. The website company, however, immediately removed the comments from the discussion forum. The case was quickly settled as the company agreed, shortly after a discussion with the EOC, to post a notice reminding users and members that it is against the Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) to post racially derogatory remarks. It also reminded its members that the company would delete the message and deactivate the account of its members if they post unlawful discriminatory remarks.

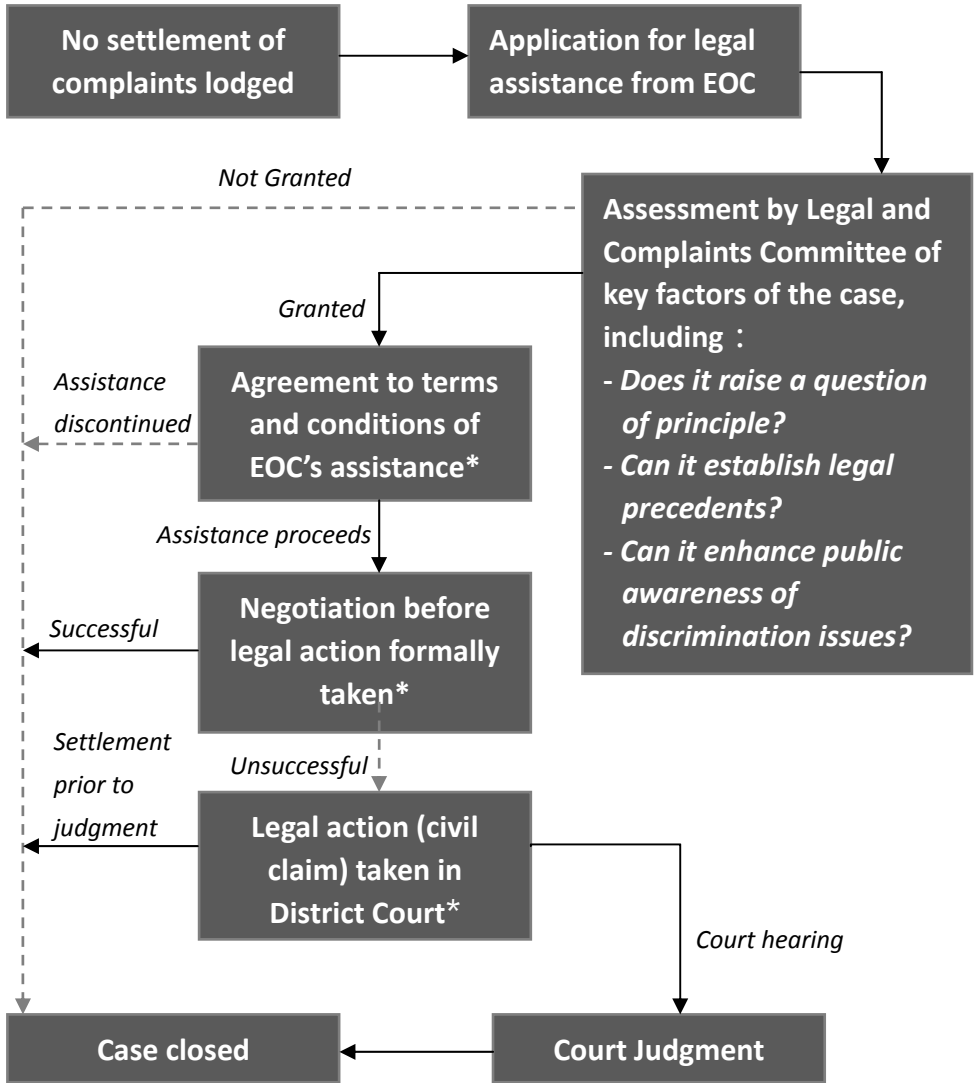


Points to Note:

- Although the internet offers anonymity in expressing one's opinion, verbal and written comments which vilify a person on the basis of their race may still be unlawful. Aside from such comments, vilification covers any "activity in public" including any form of communication to the public (such as broadcasting, screening and playing of recorded materials); any conduct observable by the public (such as gestures, flags, signs, or emblems); or the distribution or dissemination of any matter to the public.
- Racially vilifying remarks are often the product of prejudicial thinking about different races. Ethnic minorities constitute about 6% of Hong Kong's population, but unfamiliarity with other people's customs, culture and language may give rise to biases and stereotypes against different groups. The EOC encourages the community to learn about each other's traditions and culture to reach mutual understanding and promote racial equality.
- Any racist incitement involving threat of physical harm to persons or their property or premises is considered serious vilification and is liable for a fine of a maximum of \$100,000 and imprisonment for a maximum of two years.

Tip: For more information, refer to the EOC's resource webpage on race issues, A World of Colours.

Applying for Legal Assistance (Flow Chart)



*EOC will continuously assess the case in the light of further development, and may change the manner of assistance or even discontinue assistance accordingly.

EOC Court Cases

The following cases, unless otherwise indicated, were granted legal assistance by the EOC after conciliation attempts were unsuccessful during the complaint handling process.

In cases where damages for injury to feelings were awarded, the Court generally took into account precedents set by local and overseas cases of a similar nature.

Sexual Harassment

1

B v King of the King Group Limited DCEO 9/2010

◆ **Background**

The Plaintiff was sexually harassed by a dim sum worker employed by the Defendant. The harassment incident involved the dim sum worker making a sexual remark and touching her chest. The Plaintiff complained to the Defendant, but it did not take any prompt action. When the Plaintiff wanted to report the harassment to the police, the Defendant pressured her not to do so or both she and the harasser would be dismissed.

The Defendant eventually arranged a meeting during which the harasser was told to apologize to the Plaintiff. However, he did so in a disrespectful manner. Aggravated by the harasser's disrespect, the Plaintiff slapped the harasser in the face. She was then dismissed by the Defendant. The Plaintiff filed a complaint

with the EOC against the harasser and the defendant for sexual harassment and vicarious liability for the harassment respectively. The Plaintiff's claim against the harasser was settled via conciliation, while the Plaintiff's case against the Defendant was brought to the Court under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO).

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court accepted the Plaintiff's evidence and found that the acts committed by the harasser amounted to unlawful sexual harassment. The Defendant, as the harasser's employer, was liable for his acts because it did not take reasonably practicable steps to prevent sexual harassment against the Plaintiff in the workplace. However, the Court ruled that the dismissal was because the Plaintiff slapped the harasser, not because she was sexually harassed or she is female. The Court awarded damages to the Plaintiff for injury to feelings in the sum of HK\$80,000, as well as costs to the Plaintiff.

2

L v David Roy Burton
DCEO15/2009

◆ **Background**

The Plaintiff was offered a position with a marketing firm, of which the Defendant was the general manager. Before the Plaintiff commenced her employment and during her employment, the Defendant made numerous sexual advances towards her and twice touched her inappropriately. The Plaintiff rejected the Defendant's advances every time. The Defendant's attitude

towards the Plaintiff deteriorated and finally he dismissed her. When informing her of the dismissal, he forcefully grabbed and bruised the Plaintiff's wrist. The Plaintiff lodged a complaint to the EOC, but attempts at conciliation were not successful. With the EOC's assistance, the Plaintiff brought proceedings against the Defendant under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO).

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court found that there was a clear case of sexual harassment under the SDO based on the Plaintiff's undisputed evidence. The Court awarded damages to the Plaintiff for injury to feelings, loss of earnings, and exemplary damages.

Injury to feelings	HK\$ 100,000
Loss of earnings	HK\$ 77,039
Exemplary damages	HK\$ 20,000
	<hr/> HK\$197,039 <hr/>

The Court awarded HK\$100,000 in damages for injury to feelings flowing from both the acts of sexual harassment and the dismissal. In assessing the award, the Court considered the fact that the offensive behavior of the Defendant persisted for over a month, and that the eventual dismissal of the Plaintiff was high-handed and abusive to the Plaintiff's personal dignity. As a result of the sexual harassment, the Plaintiff suffered anxiety, stress, humiliation, physical injury, and insomnia.

For loss of earnings, the Court awarded an amount equal to five months and 14 days' income, as the Plaintiff was unemployed for

that period before finding other employment.

The Court further awarded \$20,000 in exemplary damages. The objective of exemplary damages is to punish the Defendant for his conduct and to mark the Court's disapproval of such conduct as the compensatory award was insufficient to punish the Defendant in the present case.

The Court also awarded legal costs to the Plaintiff, which it found to be warranted by the circumstances of the case. The Plaintiff had conducted the proceedings in a reasonable manner, whereas the Defendant refused to settle or to apologize for his wrongful conduct. Furthermore, the Court was of the view that the Defendant should have known from the outset that his conduct was wrong, as every adult should know that it is wrong to make unwelcome sexual advances on another person.

3

A v Chan Wai Tong
DCEO 7/2009

◆ **Background**

The Plaintiff worked with the Defendant in the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) as an Assistant Hawker Control Officer. In the workplace, the Defendant sexually harassed the Plaintiff by making sexual remarks, physical contacts and other unwelcome conducts of a sexual nature against her. The Plaintiff complained to the FEHD which conducted an internal investigation. However, the Plaintiff's complaint was found to be unsubstantiated.

Despite the result of her internal complaint, the Plaintiff persisted and lodged a complaint with the EOC. The Defendant denied the allegation and claimed that the Plaintiff's complaint was a revenge for his gossiping with other colleagues about her relationship with one of her supervisors. The Plaintiff brought her claim against the Defendant to the Court under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO).

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court accepted the Plaintiff's claims, whose timeline and details were corroborated by witnesses and supported by her own notes of the acts. It found that the Defendant committed unlawful sexual harassment. It rejected his defence that the Plaintiff's claim was in retaliation for his gossiping.

The Court indicated that the result of the internal investigation did not affect its ruling in the present case, because the internal investigation adopted the criminal standard of proof of "beyond all reasonable doubt", which is more stringent than the "balance of probability" standard used by the Court.

The Court made an order that the Defendant should give a written apology to the Plaintiff. It also awarded costs and monetary compensation to the Plaintiff as below:

Injury to feelings	HK\$ 50,000
Exemplary damages	HK\$ 10,000
	<hr/>
	HK\$60,000
	<hr/>

The Court awarded \$50,000 in damages for injury to feelings. The Court further awarded \$10,000 in exemplary damages to punish the Defendant for his conduct in inflicting harm as he completely fabricated his defence that the Plaintiff's claim was in retaliation for his gossiping.

The Court also awarded costs to the Plaintiff because the Defendant refused to attempt conciliation arranged by the EOC and made a totally fabricated defence.



Pregnancy Discrimination

4

Lam Wing Lai v YT Cheng (Chingtai) Ltd DCEO 6/2004

◆ Background

The Plaintiff was employed in 2001 as an executive secretary to the Director of the Defendant. Her work performance was satisfactory, as evidenced by her salary increment after she had passed the probation period. Later, the Plaintiff became pregnant. In February 2002, the Plaintiff suffered a threatened miscarriage and informed her boss of the condition. From June to August 2002, the Plaintiff needed to take frequent sick leave due to further pregnancy complications. During this period, the Plaintiff discovered that a permanent secretary was recruited. She worried that the new secretary would be her replacement, though the Defendant assured her then that it would not be the case.

After the Plaintiff gave birth, the Defendant's human resources manager told her that her boss thought she should stay at home to look after her baby and take more rest given her poor health situation. Nevertheless, the Plaintiff resumed duty upon her completion of maternity leave in November 2002 as scheduled. However, she was moved to another work station with no properly equipped computer. In addition, she was not given her original duties. A week later, she was dismissed under the pretext that a customer had complained about her.

The Plaintiff brought proceedings against the Defendant under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) and the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FSDO).

✓ **The Court’s decision**

The Court found that the Plaintiff had established the relevant facts so that inferences could be drawn to support her claims of pregnancy and family status discrimination. On the other hand, the Defendant had failed to offer a reasonable explanation to the Plaintiff’s dismissal. Therefore, the Court found that the Defendant discriminated against the Plaintiff on the grounds of pregnancy and family status.

As a result, the Plaintiff was awarded a total of HK\$163,500, with the breakdown of the damages as follows:

Loss of income	HK\$ 88,500
Injury to feelings	HK\$ 75,000
	<hr/> HK\$163,500 <hr/>

The Court granted damages for loss of income as it took the Plaintiff four and a half months to find a new job. Since the new job’s salary was lower than the one offered by the Defendant, the Court had also awarded the salary’s difference to the Plaintiff, but limited to a period of three months, as the Court realized that work in the private sector offered no guarantees of security of salary and employment.

For the injury to feelings, the Court considered that the Plaintiff had worked for the Defendant for one and a half years in a respected position and had established friendships with colleagues. Therefore, the amount of injury to feelings awarded was slightly higher than in other cases.

5

Chan Choi Yin v Toppan Forms (Hong Kong) Ltd
DCEO 6/2002

◆ **Background**

The Plaintiff began her employment as an Account Manager with the Defendant in 1997. Around a year later, she became pregnant. After giving pregnancy notice to the Defendant, the Plaintiff faced a series of less favourable treatments by the Defendant. These included derogatory remarks made by the senior management about her pregnancy, repeated demands by her supervisor ordering her to return to work during sick leave and black-storm warnings, and transfer to a new team which resulted in a substantial reduction of her income and difficult working conditions.

The less favourable treatments continued when the Plaintiff resumed duty upon the completion of her maternity leave in 1999. Particularly, she was transferred to another division against her will, resulting in a further reduction of her income as well as a demotion.

As a result, the Plaintiff lodged a complaint with the EOC. Later, the Defendant informed her that she would be made redundant

due to the closing of her division. She was further told to withdraw her complaint or she would be dismissed. Eventually she was dismissed in 2000.

The Plaintiff brought proceedings against the Defendant under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO).

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court found that the Plaintiff had established the relevant facts so that inferences could be drawn to support her claims of pregnancy discrimination and victimization, whereas the Defendant had failed to offer a reasonable explanation to the Plaintiff's less favourable treatment and dismissal. The Court found that the Defendant discriminated against the Plaintiff on the ground of pregnancy and by way of victimization under the SDO.

As a result, the Plaintiff was awarded a total of HK\$544,156.15, with the breakdown of the damages as follows:

Loss of earnings	HK\$ 164,505.20
Future loss of earnings	HK\$ 179,650.95
Injury to feelings	HK\$ 200,000.00
	<hr/> HK\$544,156.15 <hr/>

The loss of earnings was calculated based on the amount that the Plaintiff could have earned if she had not been transferred.

For the future loss of earnings, the Court decided that the Plaintiff should recover six months' loss of income because the Court viewed that she should be able to find alternative employment with a similar salary within that period.

For the injury to feelings, the Court viewed that a substantial amount should be awarded to the Plaintiff to reflect the long period of injury she suffered. While the Defendant's unfair treatment towards the Plaintiff had lasted for two years since her pregnancy until her dismissal, the Plaintiff was further deprived of a favourable reference from the Defendant for more than three years while the legal proceedings were going on.



Judicial Review involving issues of the SDO

6

Equal Opportunities Commission v Director of Education HCAL 1555/2000

◆ **Background**

Since 1978, gender scaling, separate queues in banding for boys and girls, and fixed gender quotas in co-educational schools had been used as criteria in the Government's Secondary School Places Allocation System (SSPA System). In its Formal Investigation Report issued in 1999, the EOC advised that these elements were discriminatory as individual boys and girls received less favourable treatment purely on the basis of sex. After the decision by the Director of Education to continue to maintain the discriminatory aspects of the SSPA System, the EOC applied to the High Court for judicial review to challenge the legality of the System.

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court held that the operation of the SSPA System amounted to unlawful direct sex discrimination against individual pupils under the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) in all three gender-based elements challenged by the EOC:

First, there was a scaling mechanism which adjusted the scores of students from different schools so as to enable comparison between them. Boys and girls were treated separately in the

scaling process with different scaling curves. This meant that the eventual priority in school placement depended in part on gender.

Second, there was a banding mechanism which put all students into bands based on their adjusted scores. Different band cutting scores were used for boys and girls, so that, for example, girls needed a higher score for the top band than boys. This again meant that priority for placement depended in part on gender.

Third, there was a gender quota in co-educational secondary schools to ensure that a fixed ratio of boys and girls would be admitted to each school. This meant that admission might depend on gender.

The Government tried to rely on the special measure exception under the SDO in its defence. It argued that the discriminatory elements of the System were not unlawful because they were reasonably intended to ensure that boys have equal opportunities with girls by reducing the advantage girls enjoyed through their better academic performance. The Court rejected this argument for two reasons. First, there was no firm evidence of any developmental difference inherent in gender, and second, the discriminatory elements were disproportional to the objective of ensuring equal opportunities for the boys.

Disability Discrimination

7

Kwok Wing Sun v Law Yung Kai Trading as Wan Kou Metal & Plastic Factory DCEO 2/2007

◆ **Background**

The Plaintiff had been having ventricular septal defect and renal disease for years. Though he needed to attend medical check-up regularly, his work ability was unaffected according to his doctor's opinion. He was employed as a family driver by the Defendant in May 2005 and he passed the 3-month probation period in August 2005.

In September 2005, the Plaintiff submitted a sick leave application form for his medical check-up to the wife of the Defendant. She became angry and asked for details of his disabilities. From that moment on, she began to pick on the Plaintiff and imposed new restrictions on his work. In January 2006, the Plaintiff was dismissed by the Defendant without being given any reason.

The Plaintiff brought proceedings against the Defendant under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO).

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court was satisfied that the Plaintiff had provided sufficient evidence to substantiate his disability discrimination claim. The

Court took the view that there was no sufficient reason to dismiss the Plaintiff. The Court found that the Plaintiff was unlawfully discriminated and dismissed on the ground of his disabilities.

As a result, the Plaintiff was awarded a total of HK\$98,500, and the breakdown of the damages was as follows:

Loss of income	HK\$ 43,500.00
Injury to feelings	HK\$ 55,000.00
	<hr/>
	HK\$98,500.00

For the loss of earnings, the Court decided that the Plaintiff should recover six months' loss of income as the Court viewed that he should be able to find alternative employment with a similar salary within that period. For the injury to feelings, the Court took into account the length of time the Plaintiff had worked for the Defendant and the treatment he had received during his employment period.

8

K & Ors v Secretary for Justice
DCEO 3, 4 and 7/1999

◆ **Background**

There were three Plaintiffs in this case, namely K, Y and W. They had applied for the posts of ambulance man, fireman and customs officer respectively in the Fire Services Department and the Customs and Excise Department. In all three cases, the Plaintiffs

were given conditional offers of employment, which were subsequently withheld or terminated because they had a parent with mental illness.

It was both Departments' policies to reject job applicants who have a first degree relative with a history of mental illness of a hereditary nature. The Departments defended such a policy by arguing that the safety of fellow employees and members of the public was an inherent job requirement, and as the Plaintiffs were unable to fulfill such a requirement, the Departments' above decisions were not unlawful.

✓ **The Court's decision**

The Court held that the two Departments had discriminated against the Plaintiffs on account of the mental illness of their relatives, i.e. the disability of an associate under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO).

The Court further held that the Departments could not rely on the inherent job requirement exemption under the DDO. In the Court's view, the safety to fellow employees and members of the public was agreed to be an inherent job requirement for all the three positions above. Nevertheless, the Departments failed to provide sufficient evidence to establish that the Plaintiffs' inability to meet such requirement was because of their parents' mental illness, as there was no information showing the Plaintiffs' risk to the mental illness was higher which would pose a real risk to safety. Hence, the Departments' discriminatory acts could not be exempted and hence were unlawful.

In calculating damages for injury to feelings, the Court took into account the prolonged period of injury caused to the Plaintiffs by the defence of the discrimination and the attitude of the Departments. The Court also considered the loss of past and future earnings as well as other benefits such as housing and pension entitled to the Plaintiffs had they been able to work in the Departments. The damages awarded to each of them could be summarized as follows

	K	Y	W
	HK \$	HK \$	HK \$
Damages for injury to feelings	100,000.00	100,000.00	150,000.00
Interest thereon (11.5%)	23,000.00	28,206.94	46,478.70
Past loss of earnings (including interest)	106,510.28	96,939.54	97,884.13
Future loss of earnings	194,224.00	114,300.00	42,480.00
Loss of housing benefit	299,400.00	267,300.00	409,860.00
Loss of pension benefit	262,009.00	168,996.00	314,432.00
	985,143.28	775,742.48	1,061,134.83

Cases where EOC acted as Amicus Curiae

9

Secretary for Justice v Chan Wah FACV 11 and 13/2000

◆ **Background**

Two non-indigenous villagers challenged the validity of the village representative election arrangements in the villages they lived in. This case involved a number of constitutional and administrative law issues, and the EOC was involved in this case by acting as Amicus Curiae¹ for issues relating to the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO). The relevant points in the Court's decision as related to discrimination issues are detailed below.

✓ **The Court's decision**

First, in the villages concerned, non-indigenous females married to indigenous villagers had the right to vote, while non-indigenous males married to indigenous villagers were not entitled to the same right. The Court held that this amounted to sex discrimination against men under the SDO.

Second, due to the above arrangement, married non-indigenous females enjoyed the right to vote, whereas single non-indigenous females did not. This amounted to marital status discrimination under the SDO.

¹ Amicus Curiae: one (as a professional person or organization) that is not a party to a particular litigation but that is permitted by the court to advise it in respect to some matter of law that directly affects the case in question. (Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Third, in order to have the right to vote, married female indigenous villagers must have resided in the village for seven years while there was no such requirement for married male indigenous villagers. Fourth, female indigenous villagers were excluded from standing as candidates in elections, while there was no such prohibition against male indigenous villagers. These amounted to sex discrimination against women under the SDO.

The Court of Final Appeal restated the following general legal principles which are relevant to all sex discrimination cases:

1. In considering whether a particular arrangement is discriminatory or not, the Court will adopt the “but for” test, to look at whether there is a less favourable treatment on the ground of a person’s sex. For example, if a female would have received the same treatment as a male but for her sex, then there is discrimination.
2. The intention or motive of the defendant to discriminate is not a necessary condition to liability, though it may be a relevant consideration. A prima facie case of discrimination will arise when a particular arrangement has the effect of favouring some persons because of his or her sex or marital status.

Secretary for Justice v Yau Yuk Lung FACC 12/2006

◆ Background

This is a Court of Final Appeal case where the constitutionality of s. 118F(1) of the Crimes Ordinance, which criminalizes homosexual buggery committed otherwise than in private, was challenged. The main issue in this case is whether the section concerned amounts to sexual orientation discrimination. The EOC's participation in this case was to act as Amicus Curiae to provide assistance in respect of general principles of discrimination law.

It should be noted that although there is no anti-discrimination ordinance to protect against sexual orientation discrimination in Hong Kong at present, sexual orientation discrimination is unconstitutional under art. 25 of the Basic Law and art. 22 of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights, in which the right to equality before the law is protected. Also, the principles elaborated by the Court as follows actually apply to differential treatments on all grounds in general.

✓ The Court's decision

In this case, the Court viewed that the law should usually accord identical treatment to comparable situations in general. However, the guarantee of equality before the law does not invariably require exact equality. In order to determine whether differential treatments are justified, the test is to see whether the difference:

1. pursues a legitimate aim, which means there must be a genuine need for such a difference;
2. is rationally connected to the legitimate aim; and
3. is no more than is necessary to accomplish the legitimate aim.

The Court examined the difference in treatment in s. 118F (1) of the Crimes Ordinance, applied the above justification test and concluded that even step (1) of the above test could not be satisfied here because:

1. Only homosexuals, but not heterosexuals, were subject to the statutory offence, hence giving rise to differential treatments on the ground of sexual orientation; and
2. No genuine need for the differential treatments had been shown by the Government, meaning that no legitimate aim to be pursued by the differential treatments could be established.

Therefore, it was held by the Court that s. 118F (1) of the Crimes Ordinance was discriminatory and unconstitutional.