

By Wen-Jing Lin

## My womb is my business

**“D**o you plan to have children?” The question came out of nowhere. I was sitting in a professor’s office, interviewing for a postdoc position, when the topic suddenly shifted from my science to my womb. I paused, unsure how to respond. I didn’t feel my personal life was any of the professor’s business. But I was interested in the position, and I worried that I might not get it if I refused to answer. So I told him details about my personal life that I never imagined sharing with a stranger.

That interview was in Japan, where his question—I’ve since learned—isn’t unusual. But I’m not from Japan. I grew up in Taiwan, and it was unusual for me.

I wished I told him I thought his line of questioning was inappropriate. I worried he’d ask the same question to other interviewees in the future and make them feel just as uncomfortable. It was also demoralizing to be judged based on the odds that I would have children. “Shouldn’t my academic accomplishments be the only thing that matters?” I fumed.

At first, I told myself it was a one-off incident, an unlucky break with that particular professor. Then I got called to interview for a postdoc position at another institution in Japan. I was excited because it was at a top university and I thought it would be good for my career. But midway through the interview, a warning bell started to ring in my mind when the faculty member asked, “Do you live with your family?” Flustered, I responded, “Yes, I live with my family.” He pressed further: “Do you have kids?” Once again, I didn’t dare refuse to answer, so I found myself opening up about my personal life.

I received an offer for one of those positions, but I turned it down because I didn’t want to work in an environment where I risked being judged differently for my parental status or for being a woman. I am still trying to secure a second postdoc, and I fear I will face the same question again.

At the time of those incidents, I didn’t feel I could do anything about them, beyond complaining to friends and colleagues. But when I told my current postdoc adviser about my second interview, she was furious. She told me I could seek help from the university’s harassment counselor and report the case.

With the help of the counselor, I sent a letter to the dean and department chair who oversee the second faculty mem-



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ber, describing what happened. I told them that I wanted all the employees in the department to go through bias training on a regular basis to learn about inappropriate questions and behavior. I had no plans to work there, but I wanted to ensure that other employees and interviewees had a discrimination-free work environment.

They sent a reply 20 days later. The dean thanked me for raising the issue, and the department chair told me he would consider arranging training, but he didn’t commit to any specific steps. The chair said the professor who made the comment was sorry his questions offended me, but that they weren’t asked because of my gender—he asks every interviewee the same questions.

Unfortunately, the law is on his side: If he asks the questions of men and women, then they aren’t against the law in Japan. That’s frustrating for me because I don’t think they are appropriate questions to ask anyone, regardless of their gender.

The entire ordeal has left me feeling helpless. I lost out on a potential postdoc opportunity. And when I complained about what I perceived to be unfair treatment, I didn’t receive any assurances that the situation would change for the next scientist who interviews for a position.

In many countries, interviewers are taught not to ask interviewees about their home life. Where those kinds of questions are more culturally accepted, as in Japan, I’d argue that universities have a responsibility to push back against norms and ensure that job candidates are treated equally during the interview process. If they fail to do that, they’ll risk driving away good candidates.

Above all, I want decision-makers to build a discrimination-free environment for all scientists. I hope that, one day, no interviewee will have to hear the question, “Do you plan to have children?” ■

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# Science

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