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Mum bias at work

It's an issue as serious as sexual harassment and the glass ceiling.

By NARA SCHOENBERG

THE owner of a Chicago-based consulting and research firm, Arin Reeves has a law degree, a doctorate in sociology and a client list that includes Fortune 500 companies.

But that wasn't what an interviewer decided to focus on when considering her firm for a big project.

The bias against mums in the workplace doesn't get as much attention as sexual harassment or the glass ceiling, but it's a widespread problem, according to experts and recent studies, which point to obstacles and penalties that fathers and people without children don't experience.

In a 2007 study at Cornell University, students evaluating equivalent resumes rated mothers as less competent than women who weren't mothers, recommended them for the job less frequently, and recommended starting salaries that were US\$11,000 (RM49,000) lower.

Other research has shown that motherhood is associated with a 4% decrease in earnings per child, and a 2016 report by the Society of Women Engineers and the Centre for WorkLife Law found that while almost 80% of male engineers surveyed said having children did not change their colleagues' perceptions of their work commitment or competence, only 55% of female engineers said the same.

"We know how strong this bias is," said Joan C. Williams, a distinguished professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law and director of the Center for WorkLife Law. "It's an order of magnitude stronger than glass-ceiling bias" or bias against women in the workplace.

"It's extraordinarily strong."

In interviews with the Tribune, local women, most of whom said they didn't want to be identified by name because they feared

career fallout, described employers who seemed to assume that motherhood and a drop in career commitment go hand in hand.

A Chicago real estate agent said that while she was on maternity leave at a former sales job, her commissions were cut drastically, even though she'd already landed the accounts and her assistant was handling the follow-up. At the time, she said, she was the No. 1 salesperson in the office, but her supervisors somehow convinced themselves that she wasn't going to come back to work.

"I gave them no reason to believe that – except that I had a baby," she said.

Another woman said she was in the running for a big promotion at work two months after she got married.

That was when a vice president at her company told her that the candidates had been narrowed down to two people, her and a male employee, but he had a question that would influence the decision: Was she planning on having children anytime soon?

"I was shocked," the woman said. She quit her job soon after.

In her current job, she said, mums are appreciated and accommodated with policies such as flexible work hours.

It's not illegal to ask a female employee if she plans to have children, according to Cynthia Calvert, a senior adviser at the Centre for WorkLife Law, but it would likely violate sex-discrimination laws if an employer asked only female employees about their plans to have children, or made personnel decisions based on the answer.

In addition, some cities, including Chicago, prohibit making employment decisions based on parental status.

On average, women do reduce work hours, at least temporarily, after having kids, according to a 2014 report by UMass Amherst sociology professor Michelle

Budig.

But by Budig's calculations, the reduction in work hours only account for about one-third of the reduction in wages that women experience when they have kids. Similarly, men do, on average, increase their work hours after becoming dads, but that only accounts for at most 16% of the earnings increase associated with becoming a dad.

Even when factors such as reduced hours and seniority are taken into account, fatherhood is associated with an increase in earnings of over 6%, while motherhood is tied to a 4% decrease in earnings per child, according to Budig's research.

Reeves, who advises companies on how to achieve inclusion and maximise the potential of women and minorities, says the "baby brain" comment was the most blatant example of mum bias that she's personally experienced.

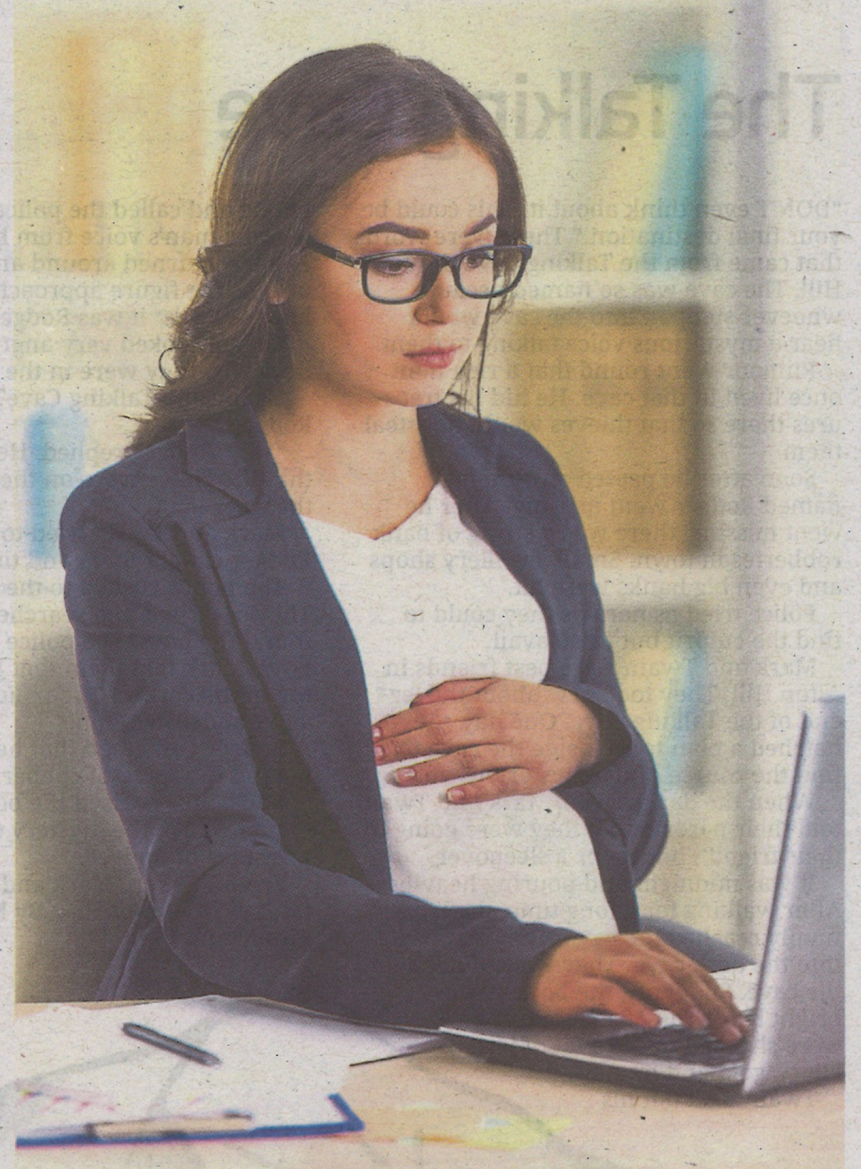
In that case, she responded directly to the question.

"I'm not worried about my brain, but I am worried about yours," she said. "Because the fact that you think you're qualified to measure exact increases and decreases in IQ in any correlation with childbirth concerns me greatly. So let's talk about that. What was the evidence (you used) to reach that conclusion?"

"I was just being sarcastic," the man said.

Reeves didn't expect to get the job after that exchange, she didn't and she was OK with that: "I'd rather stand up to him and miss an assignment than wonder if anyone's ever going to stand up to him."

Experts say that mum bias is tough to address for a range of reasons, among them that it's built into the deeply held assumption that the ideal employee – male or female – has no family responsibilities and is always available for work. Mothers fare particularly



Women who have children are perceived to be less committed to their work and are discriminated against. — TNS

poorly when judged against that standard, but anyone caring for an ill relative will take a hit.

"The entire workplace is designed as an affirmative action programme for people without daily caregiving responsibilities," Williams says.

Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, executive director of the advocacy group MumsRising, is excited about growing support for measures such as paycheck transparency laws, which seek to ensure the salary is determined by the job, not the employee's gender or parental status. The Paycheck Fairness Act has passed both the House and the Senate, she said, although not yet in the same session.

"Passing policies like paid family

leave, access to affordable child care, access to health care, those are critically important too, and those policies are on fire," Rowe-Finkbeiner said. "We just did exit polling in this presidential election, and we saw massive support by Democrats and Republicans alike for these policies."

Reeves said she does see progress, but it's coming slowly.

"Unfortunately, like a lot of things with gender equity, it takes women figuring out how to do it in spite of the barriers for the barriers to slowly come down," she said. "There are a lot of women who have scorch marks all over their bodies from blazing trails, and now we can say there are paths available." – Chicago Tribune/Tribune News Service