

## ESSAY

## ESSAY SERIES: EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

# Biased in favour

Swetha Gopalakrishnan

The story begins on a winter afternoon in Helsinki, alone in an apartment, beside the window, watching in awe as toddlers skate in a nearby park, the skates making patterns on ice that resembled the actin meshwork of a cell. My baby gave one rebellious kick – maybe she, too, was in a mood to ice skate.

After gratifying research training from a world-renowned institute in France, I had just moved to Helsinki and was on a self-imposed ‘career break’ to start a family. But one week into this break, a gloomy void descended. I didn’t need a psychoanalyst to break it to me, I felt displaced from my niche – the research lab. I was unsettled as my mind cooked up excuses. Was it too late? Will it complicate the family’s decision to return to my home country for childbirth and associated paraphernalia? But those were trivial matters; a greater uncertainty loomed – I was motivated, but who would risk hiring an expectant mother as a postdoc? Tossing it over again and again, I reassured myself – there’s no harm in trying. Juggling the idea, I once again opened the webpage of the research group whose work on stem cell aging and organelle biology had caught my attention. The call for a postdoctoral position was still open. Impulsively, I clicked the ‘apply now’ button – *c’est parti!*

Days passed by without any response while I tried to distract myself by learning to count in Finnish – *yksi, kaksi, kolme, neljä, vii...voila!* A positive response, and a Skype interview with the principal investigator (PI) was scheduled a few days later. Preparation for the interview ensued. I brushed up on the project ideas, my expertise – the usuals. All set, no stress. But wait, I had not mentioned about my pregnancy in my application at all. I started to have self-doubts again, but like a seed that has sprouted, there was no backing out now. I decided to calm my doubts with thorough preparation on how to bring the matter to the table and how I would justify my motivation and commitment to the work. I even came up with experimental strategies for the duration of the maternity leave so that the project would not suffer. It was foolproof, and I was ready.

On the morning of the interview, the webcam on my laptop decides to go into an eternal sleep. That minor glitch did not deter me from having a good interview, sans video, where we had excellent discussions on projects. Now, the moment arrived when I explained my situation, and I had just begun my well-rehearsed monologue when the PI responded, “Excellent! Congratulations! When would be a suitable time for you to visit the lab and meet the lab people?” The what? I was spellbound. No elaboration needed? But what about the motivational speech I had so thoroughly prepared? The unexpectedness of it all left me surprised.

Long after the interview was over, I sat there contemplating the PI’s response – why was it so unexpected? Hadn’t I heard, overheard and read many times about how pregnancy discrimination was prevalent and a major contributor to gender-based bias in the workplace? A more difficult question I posed myself was, if the roles were reversed, would my response be similar to that of the PI’s? Maybe yes, but I wasn’t certain. Did I assume

myself to be so much less competent that I spent days preparing to prove my motivation, all because I was an expectant mother? I knew I was focused and sharper than ever now, but does that mean that I had unconsciously coaxed myself into having an implicit bias against myself? This positive interview experience was a revelation to me as to how, as individuals without any prior ill experiences, we are susceptible to unconscious biases in our thought processes. I learned that only by being knowledgeable of the possible biases and by inspecting our choices rationally do we become aware of the prejudices that unknowingly exist in our mindsets.

Fast forward. I was offered the position in the lab a week after the interview. Thereafter, I went on maternity leave for a year, only to return to research life with even more motivation and enthusiasm. My scientific work in the lab on muscle stem-cell biology and organelle dynamics has opened up new perspectives and opportunities to study the biology of the cell in more detail. The lab has provided me with the intellectual environment and scientific rigour that I had always aspired to, and I believe as a scientist I was able to contribute positively to the lab and the institute in return. In retrospect, that interview and the job offer rekindled what was probably my last chance to continue as a scientist – a role I truly identify myself with. We are shaped by our society, and embracing the Nordic attitudes to equality and prioritising work–life balance in academic life by consciously inculcating it in the next generation of researchers and scientists is an imminent need. Academic institutions are a great launchpad to disseminate such a positive work culture into global society, as no other conglomerate harbours people from such diverse backgrounds.

As a woman in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), mother, immigrant, person of colour – all categories vulnerable to bias – I feel it is important to put forth my small experience of positive grassroots-level changes happening thanks to advocates of inclusivity like my PI, with the support of the institution. So, my fellow aspirants, don’t hold yourselves back because of your own implicit biases and self-doubt – apply for that job or grant, appear for that interview. There are positive changes happening everywhere, and the ripple effect of those steady waves of change will motivate more people to make conscious efforts to recognise bias and eventually take it out of the equation. How do I know? I asked my PI how he decided to recruit me as a postdoc. “Your ideas and expertise”. And to my question about whether he had factored in my situation as an expectant mother, he replied “yes, but it was no big deal” – this is the change.

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The author, Swetha Gopalakrishnan, is a postdoctoral fellow in the Katajisto lab (<https://www.katajisto-lab.com>) at the Institute of Biotechnology, Helsinki Institute of Life Science HiLIFE, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland and can be contacted at [swetha.gopalakrishnan@helsinki.fi](mailto:swetha.gopalakrishnan@helsinki.fi) (Twitter: @SwethaGopalakr2).