



Dear DEI, Esq: My Work Thinks My Familial Responsibilities Are Holding Me Back

Cultural Competence



In this series, [DEI, Esq.](#) is helping individuals who may have experienced or perceived some sort of bias become bias interrupters.

Dear DEI, Esq.,

I recently shared with my work colleagues that I'm divorced and am now the primary caregiver for my children. I didn't share this information for sympathy but to bring awareness to the fact that some days I may have to adjust my schedule based on my parenting responsibilities.

My manager recently announced an opportunity to go on a six-week assignment to Brazil as a project lead. I've previously mentioned to my manager that I'm interested in a short-term international assignment, and the nature of the Brazil project is in my wheelhouse. My manager didn't even consider me for the opportunity, but instead gave it to a colleague with no childcare responsibilities. I'm very disappointed that I wasn't, at least, considered. What should I do?

Sincerely,

Passed-over single dad

Dear Passed-over single dad,

This is discouraging. Thanks for sharing your experience and wanting to understand what you can do to interrupt this unconscious bias. What you may be experiencing is the ["maternal/paternal wall" bias pattern](#) where family commitments are used as a reason (or sometimes an excuse) to hold individuals with childcare responsibilities back.

This bias pattern relates to perception bias — assuming that someone without childcare

responsibilities is more capable or willing to go on an extended work trip out of the country. Here are some suggestions on how to approach this.

If you are willing to travel, say so. Communicate your career goals and expectations clearly and often. Don't allow others to create the narrative for you.

Normalize childcare responsibilities in the workplace. You took this first step already by sharing a change in your family structure. So, good for you! However, while you shared the potential challenges you may face as the primary caregiver, you forgot to underscore the fact that this does not prevent you from being committed to work.

Yes, you should not have to emphasize that, but you must remember that your manager is navigating systemic issues and misperceptions at this moment, as well. She may have been trying to alleviate a burden on you by not asking you to accept an international project now that she knows you are the primary caregiver for your children. This perception could be rooted in her own experience as a parent.

So, a sit-down with your manager will help you reinforce your expectations and goals while also making your manager aware of her unconscious biases in making this decision and future decisions.

Best of luck to you!

DEI, Esq.

[DEI, Esq.](#) is comprised of in-house counsel who share a deep passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. While the members, Jane Howard-Martin, Connie Almond, Olesja Cormney, Jennifer N. Jones, and Meyling Ly Ortiz, work as employment counsel at Toyota Motor North America, Inc., their views and the thought-leadership expressed are their own and not necessarily the views of their employer.

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Jane Howard-Martin is vice president and assistant general counsel for Toyota Motor North America, Inc. (TMNA) and manages the Labor, Employment, Immigration, Benefits and Trade Secrets practice. Howard-Martin leads the labor and employment practice group that is responsible for providing legal advice and counsel and managing litigation and labor matters for a workforce of 33,993 based in our North America affiliates, including the nine North American Manufacturing Centers (NAMCs), R&D, Finance, and Headquarters functions.

Prior to joining Toyota in 2003, Howard-Martin was a partner with Morgan, Lewis and Bockius, LLP in their Los Angeles and Pittsburgh offices, and previously was a partner at Kirkpatrick & Lockhart in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Howard-Martin has been featured in a number of publications and symposiums. She authored a column on employment issues for USA Today.com, a treatise on Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act and served on the Editorial Review Board of the Pennsylvania Labor Letter. Howard-Martin also appeared as a panelist on MSNBC's "Today in America" on the issue of harassment. She is a frequent speaker on employment law topics at various conferences including those held by the ABA, the National Employment Law Council, and the American Employment Law Council. In November 2020, Howard-Martin received the ABA Honorable Bernice B. Donald Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Legal Profession Award. She is the past President (2009) and currently serves on the board of directors of the California Employment Law Council and is also a board member of the American Employment Law Council. She is also a fellow with the College of Labor and Employment Lawyers.

Howard-Martin earned a BA from Harvard University in 1979 and received her juris doctorate degree from Harvard Law School in 1982.

She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Gus Martin, who is on the faculty at California State University, Dominguez Hills. In her free time, she enjoys ballroom and hip-hop dancing, trying international recipes, writing historical fiction, and travel.

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Jennifer Jones is managing counsel in the labor and employment group at Toyota Motor North America, Inc. She has over a decade of experience counseling employers on a broad range of labor and employment law issues. As one of the founding members of DEI, Esq., she has a deep passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and has authored many articles and participated in many panels on the subject. She also sits on the board of two nonprofit organizations, both with a mission of ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to quality secondary and post-secondary education. In her free time, Jones strives to be a “fun mom” for her two small children

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Meyling "Mey" Ly Ortiz is managing counsel of employment at Toyota Motor North America, Inc. Her passions include mentoring, championing diversity and inclusion and a personal blog: TheMeybe.com. At home, you can find her doing her best to be a "fun" mom to a toddler and a preschooler and chasing her best self on her Peloton. You can follow her on [LinkedIn](#). And you knew this was coming: her opinions are hers alone.

