

Episode 3 - Anonymous on covering her Jewish faith, marital status, and curly hair

Sarah Kaplan: This limited series podcast is from GATE Audio. GATE stands for the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, and I'm GATE's director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA Fellows, Narjis Premjee, explores the different ways that people cover and uncover their identities at work. Through interviews, first-hand accounts, and rich storytelling, Narjis ventures into the world of covering, why it happens, and what employers can do to make workplaces more inclusive. You'll be moved and inspired by her deeply personal takes on these issues, as was I. So up next, listen to what Narjis has to say.

Narjis: Welcome to Covering in the Workplace a podcast from the Institute for Gender and the Economy or GATE I'm Narjis Premjee in each episode I will be interviewing one individual on how they have covered in the workplace or perhaps never felt the need to do so. Today we are joined with an anonymous interview. She's currently going through a professional transition as she looks for her next role. Her story of covering in the workplace will be around three different aspects of her identity her religion her marital status and her appearance. This range of identities she covers only goes to show that like the theory of intersectionality our various identities are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another. So, thank you for joining us today. Would you like to start us off by sharing a little bit about your story of covering in the workplace?

Anonymous: There are three areas that I've covered in the past in one way or another. One would be my religion or background, second one would be my marital status, and the third one would be my appearance. When it comes to my religious status, I am Jewish. I'm not a very observant or practicing person. However, you know some holidays are important to me and that part of my identity has become more important as I've gotten older and having grown up in different places around the world, I found that revealing that part of myself has not always been the most productive to my life or you know welcomed. I would love to say that it's 2018 and we are all accepting of everyone and everything. However, I still get the occasional antisemitic comment. That part of me I did not reveal for a long time you know moving from there to my first job out of university was actually working for a Jewish community organization. And so, there was no hiding that anymore. and it was very different. some of the feedback that I received from even my peers that was just "oh I didn't know". There were a handful of comments which eventually led to some friendships dissolving. I think overall those closest to me always knew what my full identity was, and it was eventually those who had an issue or just weren't willing to kind of accept or understand eventually those connections just faded away. So, moving forward in my career obviously that experience is still very much relevant to the work that I'm continuing to do professionally. And so that organization is still on my resume. And there's a small part of me that kind of feels that you know "is having this organization and this experience on my resume, is noting that I speak Hebrew as one of the languages that I speak is that hindering my chances at you know perhaps gaining employment elsewhere?" But then the other side is like well if an organization is going to have an issue with my identity do I really want to be in a place like that? I've had a manager in my part-time job in university she somehow found out that I was Jewish it wasn't that I was hiding it, it was just that I never talked about it. And we had a practicing religious man come in and the two of us knew, we would congratulate each other on like holidays and things like that. I had worked there for years, and he was a regular customer, I worked at a coffee shop, and she (my manager) kind of looked over at us and kind of went "oh those people" and my teammates were just kind of were in sheer shock and horror "like what do you mean those people?" I'm happy to report that that manager after making another comment like that was no longer with the company because that's not an acceptable kind of behavior. But that was very strange to see in Canada and you know in Toronto where we have people from all over the world. So that's kind of one area right. And so, moving forward I know part of me wants to maybe go back and work in the Jewish community again. So, as I mentioned I'm currently looking for my next professional adventure as I like to call it and so one of the roles that I'm considering is with the Jewish organization and a part of me is like "well this would be really great to work with my community again." But the other part of me is like well in some time down the road when I am looking for something else, realistically, I will be because we don't stay in jobs for 25 years anymore is that going to affect my chances with my future employers?

Narjis: I guess I'm now interested in learning a bit about the other areas of covering that you mentioned. So, you talked about marital status and possibly covering that in the workplace. So, tell me about tell me about that. What was it like did you how did you feel when you covered and then how did the transition happen to uncovering?

Anonymous: So, one of the other areas that I covered was my marital status. I'm married now and during and the period of time where you know I was engaged and then got married and kind of did all of that I was in a workplace in a Startup company everybody was very open and was able to bring very much you know their whole selves to work. My role there was an office manager and one of the things that was very important to me was to create a space for people to come to work where they felt like "I can be who I am. I can draw on my experiences and kind of not feel like I have to hide anything" and we are a very diverse group of people. It's truly a representation of what Toronto looks like in the sense that we had a handful of people who were Canadian born but most people spoke another language because they had moved here or their parents had moved here from somewhere else. And you know diversity in terms of gender, diversity in terms of sexual orientation, all of those things which was very interesting to see the group dynamic and then I'm happy to say we were able to create a positive space for everyone to feel comfortable to the point that you can in the workplace. My team knew that I'd gotten engaged and then they were very happy when I got married but then eventually, I started interviewing for new jobs. I was considering leaving and eventually I did leave, and I found myself thinking about this and in fact I started putting my wedding rings in my pocket when I would go in for an interview. Was it all in my head? I don't know. but I've heard this from hiring managers and you know friends of mine who've been in human resources for years who say you know "I see a young woman I can't help it but kind of glance at her hand and see if she's married or if she's engaged and think that you know judging by her ring she is maybe in her I don't know late twenties early thirties she's going to be married or she's going to get married which means she's probably going to start a family which probably means she's there's going to be some mat leave involved" and it just kind of snowballs into this thing where they're like "well I might as well... you know... if she's going to be married and she might be a liability because she's going to start having kids, then she's going to go on mat leave and she's going to come back. Her kid's going to be sick. She's going to have to take a lot of time off." And I hate that I think it but I think it .and then the interesting thing is that some of my friends have said it and I was like "okay so what about when you see a wedding ring on a guy" I mean she's not married to herself right she's married to somebody and you know let's just asses for the sake of this example that she is in a heterosexual relationship and she's married to a man. It like it just makes me cringe with everything I have because they say when they see you know a man in his late twenties early thirties or what not with a ring on his finger that "okay so this man is responsible. He's a breadwinner. He has a family to support so he's going to be a stable employee. He's not going to job hop because he has you know responsibilities." And so, they see that as an asset. And in having these conversations with my friends and these are you know we know each other; I know how they are as people and they're not judgemental people they're very accepting and what not but when it's in the context of the workplace then it's something completely different. And like Oftentimes I can't help but make those judgment calls. And on one hand I think it's terrible. But on the other hand, I'm thinking of the business needs and that's kind of where I'm operating from.

Narjis: Right. So, knowing that hiring managers have that perspective and now that you are interviewing like you said for your next professional adventure

Anonymous: thank you for using my term (laughs)

Narjis: Yeah, I like it! So how has that impacted your interview process. have you because I know you mentioned previously you put the ring in your pocket but knowing everything you know about hiring managers and their perceptions how has it changed now that you're interviewing?

Anonymous: So, I am now deliberately not hiding it. So, I had gone through a number of interviews and my last round of looking for a new job I was going through a series of interviews, and I think at one point I either didn't have a pocket in my jacket or I just forgot and I left my rings on and then at

some point during the interview I glanced down and I realized and kind of had a mild panic attack. And then it's like well you know what fine. Yeah, I'm fine. I'm already here. If that's the thing that they're not going to like about me fine. And it's not that I show up and like you know slam my hand and, on the table, "here make sure you notice" absolutely not. But it is as I am kind of growing up if I can say that I realize that if an employer is going to be looking down at the fact that I may one day want to have a family which I may one day want to do and you know if they're not going to be supportive and if their policies are not going to be compatible with the way that I would like to lead my life then this probably isn't a good employment relationship to get into in the first place. I think what is very interesting especially now with like telecommuting being a lot more acceptable and working from home and just flexible policies like that you no longer have to be at your desk in your chair from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. work schedules are becoming a lot more flexible where you work is becoming a lot more flexible and even large corporations that have always been kind of sleeping giants and really hard to turn around in any kind of policy, even they are starting to adopt these policies. It helps them retain employees. It helps them be competitive in the market. And people are starting to realize that our work force is a lot more diverse now in terms of the needs people have and people are starting to put life before work. Whereas, for a very long time it seemed like it's work first and everything else just kind of falls by the wayside whether it be family, hobbies, or other interests. And so now employers are working on flexible policies. And I think that at least for myself it would be important for me to be in an employment relationship with a company that understands that people are not robots. And sometimes you have an appointment and sometimes you just need to work in your pajamas for a day. it's not that you're not going to be productive. You're probably going to be more productive, but you know just having that flexibility that doesn't just mean that if you need to take a care of a parent or if you need to take care of anyone of yourself you should have the flexibility to do that and not have to you know lose out in a full day of work. You could still do the work just not nine to five at your desk.

Narjis: Yeah. I think these kinds of policies like you mentioned flexible work policies they really signal to employees maybe that it is an environment that is accepting of people who want to work from home and who have families to take care of. So yeah, it's definitely something we need to be working towards. And then the last thing I'd like to talk to you about in terms of covering is appearance-based covering. So, you mentioned a little bit about that. What specifically is it about appearance-based covering that you observe?

Anonymous: I guess the third thing in terms of covering is appearance-based covering and more importantly is the way I wear my hair. And this is a topic that I'm very happy to see that it has been gaining more coverage and people are talking about it more openly now. And I am I guess Caucasian. However, my hair is very curly and for years I made a conscious choice to straighten it to wear it. whether it's very straight or you know with some wave in it but definitely a very what you see and think of as a professional image. For years my closest friends had no idea my hair was curly. For years it was just constantly fried with a flat iron. And you know if I couldn't if I didn't have the time well, I always made the time. I would make sure to wake up extra early to take care of that and I just thought of this mane of curls that's on my head as this like unsightly, unkempt like really unprofessional. A lot of it was from the way that professional people professional women are portrayed in our media in our workplaces. As an example, I worked at law firm at one point and kept my hair straight as always. And we had a candidate come in for an interview. She had this gorgeous head of curls, and you know she was very professionally dressed in a suit. She was really lovely. I don't know how she did in her interview but when I saw her, she was very nice and polite and then the person who interviewed her at our office was like "Ugh d like you know there's something really unprofessional about the way she presents herself. And you know her hair is just really all over the place." And I was like wow I just kind of took a deep breath and I was like It's a good thing you don't see me first thing in the morning because you wouldn't have hired me. And you know I'm part of the Reddit, the curly hair subreddit, which I'm so happy exists and there are women who share and even men who share these stories you know men who forever worn a buzz cut because they're like well "it turns into a mane that I can't do anything" with or you know and they're like "I don't want to be seen as you know unprofessional in my role" and same thing with women especially African American women and of course I can't speak to their experience but lots and lots of women there are talking about these experiences where they've straightened their hair, they've chemically relaxed, they they've worn wigs and weaves and all sorts of other extensions and what have you just to make sure that their hair appears as it quote

unquote "should appear" straight sleek smooth and portraying that kind of texture. And I think as we are evolving, and you know growing to be more accepting I guess or just being okay with seeing other people and other kinds of features on magazine covers in the media on TV shows I think I've made the decision to let my hair do its thing naturally and just wear it in its natural curly state. And stop frying it and stop destroying it. Every time I would wash it, I just see clumps of it just fall down to drain because it's so damaged. And from time to time, I do make the conscious effort to straighten it because I want to appear professional. so, for example for interviews I most often go in with my hair straightened. Because I feel like it portrays a more professional image but then when I'm in the workforce and I actually work in this place I let it be natural.

Narjis: Would you say there was something that happened or motivated you to let it in a natural state even during work?

Anonymous: I think that what led me to let my hair be in its natural state during work is maybe becoming more okay with it myself or feeling like this is an environment that won't be negative towards it. Like this environment would be accepting or perhaps there are other people who are like me and they're not having to deal with any negative comments of like "well what's happening with this mane? I can't see my screen behind it" or whatnot whereas you know in other environments I knew that okay this definitely would not be okay.

Narjis: And what is it about the environment?

Anonymous: So, for example when I made the conscious effort or the conscious decision to let my hair down so to speak or a brief period of time there was another girl who wore her hair curly all the time and I mean she came into the interview with her hair curly. I interviewed her I thought okay I didn't think anything of it. In fact, I thought it was very nice that she you know wears her hair in this natural state. And then eventually we hired her, and she came on board full time. And then you know just having another person there I kind of felt like I can do this too. I try to as much as I can put away my hot tools and just let my hair do its thing.

Narjis: I'm really happy to hear that. Like all three stories you've shared in one way of another you are bringing your full self to work. You are being more authentic. So that's awesome. Congratulations on that and I hope that your stories really help other people do the same. I do have two other general questions if that's okay. So, it seems you've worked in multiple organizations, would you say it was easier to bring your whole self to work in one versus the other? And why is that?

Anonymous: So yes, I've worked in multiple places and I think that there's definitely room to bring more or less of yourself to different environments. And I think it's just based on the type of environment I've worked in a variety of settings from smaller places to my recent employment was in a very large corporation very large professional firm and I think initially what helped me kind of uncover and peel back some of the layers that I've been hiding was the environment that felt like it would be accepting. I think it got easier to bring my authentic self to work in my next place. So, at the startup that I worked at it was very new when I joined, I think it was in its fourth month in Canada when I started. So really there was not a lot of policies or procedures, and the team was still being created. It gave all of us a chance to bring kind of pieces of ourselves and really influence how this team is going to look and how this company is going to function. And one of the things that I was able to do was work towards creating that inclusive and accepting environment that you know I'm happy to say that I think I was able to achieve quite well. And so being there allowed me to feel more comfortable in my own skin and in my all those different identities that I didn't necessarily feel okay sharing in the past, I was able to share them little by little and kind of talk about it with different people you know studying off with maybe like a friend at work or two and then kind of expanding to the whole team. And then when I think that experience of being open about who I am and all those different components of myself that I've hidden for so long and seeing that people are not responding negatively maybe they're just not responding either way, but they're not responding negatively. I think that allowed me to feel comfortable or safe even to bring my whole self to the next place that I worked

at and hopefully wherever I end up working next, I will continue to bring my whole self. Is that going to be possible? Hopefully, but there's no way of telling until I know.

Narjis: And you mentioned that you as an employee also work towards creating that inclusive environment in the organization. So, could you elaborate on how you've done that or how generally an organization encourages people to uncover or maybe even keeps people covered?

Anonymous: the way I try to encourage my organization my colleagues to kind of bring their whole selves to work and to kind of feel okay and open about being who they truly are. I think it stems from generally my desire to feel like my overall like who I am as a person. One of the things that is very important for me is to allow people whether it be my friends or my colleagues or a stranger on the street if somebody needs to have that someone to talk to or to kind of just feel safe, share, or just feel safe to just be quiet or just work through whatever it is that they need to work through. That's one of the things that I find is very important. And I think as a person that is a thing that is very important for me to enable other people to have that if that makes sense. So being in a work environment like when someone's like "oh I'm having this issue oh never mind never mind" I kind of like "no don't worry. Like what's going on. feel free to share. I'm here to listen" and just kind of giving people that the opportunity just leave it in there for them. And it's up to them to decide whether they feel comfortable talking to me they feel comfortable sharing or they feel comfortable saying "you know what I'm just going to work through this on my own."

We had one of the colleagues at this company before he was gay, and he very much covered that identity of himself and you know a couple of people knew. But he never really talked about his partner or anything like that. And then there was an event that we had scheduled like a team bonding event that we scheduled, and it just happened to be on the first night of pride. And he was like "oh I'm not going to come to this because dude it's pride" And then I think at the time I had no idea or maybe I had a hunch, but I kept it to myself, and I was like "oh okay cool. All right. So, we'll move it to the next day. Don't worry about it. We really want you there." And I was like "oh amazing. Like have a blast at this thing. I'm so happy that you're going" and then kind of made sure that moving forward you know certain things were more inclusive. The language was more inclusive it was maybe bringing your significant others you know something like that right. As opposed to bring your boyfriend girlfriend right, or like your husband/wife because well that's not the case for everybody and not everybody uses those labels. And you know this was several years ago where awareness of these things was perhaps not as front and center as it is now. But you know that's an example of when people needed to take care of their parents or when one of our colleagues was having a baby and him and his wife were having the first child and we threw him a baby shower because why not? Her work threw her a baby shower, so we threw him one and it was a great experience. And I think everybody you know everybody got a good laugh. Everybody brought baby pictures and like a just kind of fun thing to do but again I know that it's not everywhere that you can do that.

Narjis: I've loved all the stories you've shared so far. Stories about yourself and also how organizations need to create a more inclusive environment. I think there's so much to learn from the stories you've shared. And I really hope that like I said it helps other people uncover and helps organization know what needs to be done in order to create an inclusive environment where we women can really bring their full self to work. So, thank you so much for your time I really really appreciate it. Thank you for coming.

Anonymous: Thank you very much for having me. I really do hope that sharing this allows people to feel just a little bit more okay. About being who truly are.

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