

In South Korea, It's Normal to Ask Job Seekers About Their Weight

- Applicants asked about religion, family background, weight
- Govt to issue guidelines for private sector, then revise laws



Jobseekers wait in line at a job fair in Incheon, South Korea, on May 24, 2017.

Photographer: SeongJoon Cho/Bloomberg

When 28-year-old Joo Yerim applied for a job at an art distribution company in Seoul last year, she was required to provide her height and weight on the application. The experience left her angry and frustrated.

“That has nothing to do with my ability to work,” said Joo, a university graduate who had interned at similar companies in the U.S.

The questions faced by Joo, who eventually landed a position at an art magazine, would bring an avalanche of complaints and a consumer boycott in many countries. In others, the firm would be hauled before the courts. But in South Korea employers routinely demand such information, along with personal details like an applicant’s age, religion and even the occupations of their family members.

It adds up to what President Moon Jae-in says is discrimination against people who are less affluent or deviate from the mainstream. Moon pledged during his campaign to prohibit such practices as part of his fight against growing inequality, particularly in the [job market](#).

[Read more: Moon Stresses Fairness Over Growth in Korea's Five-Year Plan](#)

As South Korea continues to move up the value chain from heavy industry to a more creative economy, diversity will become more important.

While research and development spending and high-tech manufacturing have helped the economy win accolades for [innovation](#), a rigid two-tier labor market is the focus of widespread anger over stagnant wages and limited opportunity. Many young people, even those with college degrees, see themselves as largely excluded from careers, with little chance of being able to afford to get married and raise children.

Sometimes the information sought by companies veers into strange territory. Yang Changmo, 26, said he was once required to provide his blood type, and is frequently asked about his "drinking and smoking capacity" during interviews. Heavy drinking with colleagues is a core element of the country's work culture.

"I think they chose me over the female applicant with almost the same qualifications as mine because I said I was a good drinker," said Yang, who worked in the hotel industry before quitting to find a new position.

Moon's administration is working to fulfill his pledges. It will issue guidelines on questions private companies can ask later this month, before revising workplace laws to make those guidelines binding, the labor and finance ministries said in a recent joint statement.

The government is already taking action in the public sector. By the end of August, 481 public offices and companies will be banned from asking job seekers for certain personal information, including family relations and physical details. Applicants will also no longer need to submit a photo of themselves. Because a civil service test must be taken, in many cases they also won't be required to submit their educational background.

Old School

Some say South Korean companies put too much emphasis during hiring on the reputation of the universities applicants attended, feeding an unhealthy level of competition to get into those schools. Critics say the system favors rote learning and leaves talented, less wealthy students behind early in life, with few opportunities to catch up.

"Discrimination against those whose schools have a 'bad' name has long been a custom," said An Sang-jin, head of the non-profit group World Without Worries About Private Education, which was founded to address problems stemming from the intense focus on private education.

While new laws would mark a step in the right direction, the prejudices that underlie discriminatory practices also need to be rooted out in the long term, said Lee Sang Min, a professor of sociology at Hanyang University in Seoul.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-09/moon-acts-to-stop-discrimination-in-korean-hiring-practices>