



Women are the Business

Season 1: Episode 4

"His and Hers" Jobs

Sophie Thomas: I'm Sophie Thomas and you're listening to Women are the Business. Before we go on, we'd like to address the unusual circumstances we're all in. As you all know, a lot has changed when it comes to the way we work and live due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that goes for podcasts too. We've had to change the way we record to take social distancing into account. So parts of this episode are in fact recorded in a makeshift studio in the backseat of my car. Apologies if you hear some noise from outside the window or anything like that. We're doing our best to make things work in these strange times just like you. Now on with the episode.

Sophie Thomas: In episode four, we're talking about gender segregation in the workplace, female and male dominated jobs. In 2020, men still dominate construction and engineering and women do the large majority of nursing and teaching work. In spite of the leaps and bounds we've made on gender equality with more women working than ever before, this is one workplace trend that has proven very, very hard to budge and it has some big implications on women, men, and the way we live.

Libby Lyons: I'm Libby Lyons and I am the director of the federal government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency and we are a regulator and tasked with collecting data from every organization in the private sector with more than 100 employees. So we collect data on things such as the jobs that women and men do in the workforce, the pay that they receive, what employers are doing in terms of sex-based harassment and discrimination, the number of women and men they have on boards and governing bodies. So we collect this data annually, we collate it, and we provide a score card every year, which gives us a pretty real picture of what is happening in terms of gender equality in Australian workplaces.

Sophie Thomas: Let's talk a little bit about the research that you guys have done into gender segregation in Australian workplaces. What are some of the key things that you've found?

Libby Lyons: The interesting thing is that over half of all Australians work in an industry that's dominated by one gender or the other and unsurprisingly, the male dominated industries or those of resources in construction, and the female dominated industries or the most female dominated industries are healthcare, social assistance and education and training. The research tells us that out of the 19 industries or the categories of industries that are reported into us in our data set, just eight have a gender balance. So we're not doing well really on that score.

Libby Lyons: The proportion of women in the female dominated industry of education and training, has actually gone up over the last couple of years, which is disappointing. It was 62.5% in 2014 and it's gone up to 63.4 in 2019. There is no reason for that. In this day and age, there is no reason for that. And the other thing that I think is really interesting is that it doesn't matter what industry you work in, whether it be female dominated, male dominated or balanced, there is a gender pay gap in favor of men in all of them.

Sophie Thomas: Libby, who was an alum of the university, has seen firsthand what it's like to be part of Australia's gender divided workforce. She studied education and became a school teacher before jumping into IT, then went into corporate affairs working mainly in the mining sector.

Libby Lyons: So I went from the very female dominated industry of teaching, to the heavily male dominated industry of mining. So until I moved into the agency, I had never really considered my agenda as having been a handicap to me in the workplace. But when I got to the agency and I started looking at the data that we were collecting, it made me stop and think about some of the hurdles I had personally had to overcome. So the data was hugely influential in the way I started looking at workplaces and thinking about the work that needed to be done.

Sophie Thomas: So did you ever anticipate that you would be in this kind of job now?

Libby Lyons: No never.

Sophie Thomas: Yeah.

Libby Lyons: Never. But this has been the best job I've ever had.

Sophie Thomas: Our next guest is a researcher who also uses data to assess how organizations are tracking when it comes to gender equality. He also advises them on how to make changes for the better.

Victor Sojo: I am Victor Sojo. I am a lecturer in leadership at the University of Melbourne. I want to figure out what are the different attributes of people who manage to become leaders and why is it so hard for certain people to achieve those positions, whereas it's so easy for others.

Sophie Thomas: Victor himself works in a female dominated field, gender research. What is it like to be a man who studies gender equity?

Victor Sojo: Basically, when I'm doing research about gender equity, people don't think that I have an agenda. People don't think that I'm doing this for myself, that I have an ulterior motive when I'm advocating for somebody else is to be treated like a real human. But whenever I talk about the inclusion of members of the queer community or ethnic minorities, people straight away think that I'm just talking about me and that I'm just trying to advocate for myself and they stop listening.

Sophie Thomas: Does anyone ever think it's weird? Say things to you?

Victor Sojo: Yes, absolutely. People asking me like, "Why do you care about this?" And I'm like, "Well, I think that women are humans and I care about humans, being well." My mom was a single mom, okay? So I grew up in an environment where she was a feminist, she had to work because there was no other way to raise four kids, but by working. And I grew up in a place where women were working and doing everything that they needed to do. And so I find it quite odd when there are many situations that actually make it more difficult for women to be able to do everything they want to be and want to do. And so I think in a way that also has definitely been at the back of my mind when I'm thinking about these sort of issues. The fact that I grew up in a home where women were in charge and doing things and it was fine.

Sophie Thomas: Victor has done a lot of research on how gender impacts working life in Australia and abroad.

Victor Sojo: We know that for a fact that in Australia, men are more likely to occupy positions of power both in the public and private sector, whereas women are more likely to occupy what you would consider precarious jobs. Jobs that have lower salaries, where you are more exposed to abuse from clients or your supervisor, and where there is not a lot of job security.

Sophie Thomas: You've probably heard of the glass ceiling, the invisible barrier that blocks women's career progression. Well, organizational researchers have observed another gender trend in female dominated organizations. They call it the glass escalator.

Victor Sojo: Which is that men who enter female dominated work environments are more likely to be prepped and to be brought into leadership positions sooner than their female counterparts. A lot of the work that I do is in what you would consider female dominated work environments or government sector NGOs and a lot of the leadership roles are either gender balanced or have more men than women, even though the whole industry is 70 or plus percent women. That's why when people talk about female dominated work environments, you're always started doubting what they mean. Because even in those environments, men are at least equally likely to get to positions of power relative to women.

Sophie Thomas: But is it a problem if there isn't equal representation at work?

Victor Sojo: Well, as most people know, engineering is a very male dominated environment, car manufacturing in particular, it's even more male

dominated. But what used to happen is that they crash test dummies that they were using to evaluate the safety levels of the cars, were designed for having the measurement of the average man. And so we ended up in a situation where even though women were less likely to be involved in car accidents, they were more likely to get severely injured when they were in an accident.

Victor Sojo: And so we're not arguing here that this is an issue of people intentionally designing a situation that ends up being harmful to women, but it's more about the fact that there are so many things that you are not keeping in your mind when you're making important decisions, right? And so if you're not consulting the right people or if the right people are in the room when you're making important decisions about them, it is quite possible that you are going to end up developing a service or a product that doesn't really take them into consideration.

Sophie Thomas: I suppose that extends to politics too.

Victor Sojo: 100%. In fact, it's interesting because I feel that in politics that the evidence is very clear and it has been well-researched for many years now. So, I mean that's one of the reasons why people kept arguing that we needed to have some clear mechanisms to increase representation of women in politics to the point that many countries around the world, even developed nations have targets or quotas for women in politics because they realize that a number of the policies that were being developed were ignoring the needs of women and their children. So if you like it, many of the policies around women's reproductive rights are the consequence of having more women fully advocating for their own rights. Whereas if you have a power that is full of men or a Supreme Court that is full of men, it's going to be much harder for these basic fundamental rights of women to be protected or advocated for.

Sophie Thomas: Another key problem is pay. Even in female dominated industries, men earn more. Data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency shows that men in female dominated industries such as health, earn about 22% more than their female counterparts. And in male dominated industries like construction, earn about 18% more.

Victor Sojo: Yeah. So there is some research about that, that they have been tracking occupational sectors and they'd shown that when women start entering a specific occupational sector, the average salaries of the occupation, it started going down.

Sophie Thomas: What about men entering female dominated industries? Is it common? What happens?

Victor Sojo: So that's a very interesting question. So does the average salary of industry change when men enter the industry and that's precisely the case. So in the case of computer science, that's literally what we saw. Computing was a female dominated job. So you just have a bunch of women doing calculations. And so when it became an interesting area, you started having

more men walking into it and then he started getting a much higher salary than the salary that all of these women were getting by doing basically the exact same job. And so yeah, it is the case, right? When you have an industry where men are entering the salary of the sector increases.

Sophie Thomas: Men face negative consequences too, particularly when they work in male dominated workplaces.

Victor Sojo: In general, there is a fair bit of bravado. This culture of hyper masculinity, of bullying and harassment, both men and women are more likely to experience these events in male dominated work environments. And there is less care for a work family balance in these workplaces too. And it's interesting things like... So for instance, men who are working in male dominated work environments, are more likely to come back to work soon after having a physical injury, and a lot of the time without being fully recovered from this. And so they are obviously putting themselves at further risk, but also the team members and the whole organization because of this. So it's not just about what negative consequences could there be for women when this happens. But there are also many negative consequences for men.

Libby Lyons: It's a lot easier for women to work flexibly. In fact, men's requests for flexible work are twice as likely to be declined as women's are. So in order to address the real issues of discrimination that women face in our society, we actually have to address the discrimination and bias that men face in the workplace. And that is particularly around part-time work, parental leave, and flexible work. Because until we manage to address those problems of discrimination, women aren't going to get anywhere. So we need to address that first. And to me that is vitally important. Men should not be afraid to ask for flexible work.

Sophie Thomas: Are there any legitimate reasons why workplace segregation exists? I mean lots of time, people are always going to argue that men's physical strength is an example.

Victor Sojo: Yeah. That's why they end up working in construction, because they have to lift all those heavy stuff. I think the case of construction is interesting because actually relying on your personal physical strength at work is a predictor of physical injury, okay? And so you have organizations like Work Safe, that actively goes into organizations to advocate for people using the right kind of machines and equipment to prevent them using their own physical strength to do their jobs. And so this idea that we should continue to have only men in construction because they are physically stronger, when in fact all of the safety regulations and what we know about safety indicates that people should not rely on their own physical strength to do the jobs. There is like a bit of a contradiction there. The other thing that is interesting about construction is that again design.

Victor Sojo: So it is quite possible that all of the tools that people are using and all of the supplies that you need to be able to work in construction, having designed to cater for the physical strength of men. So maybe it is possible to really

sign them. A lot of the jobs that we do now, they rely on intellectual competency, not on physical one and that's an important thing to keep in mind. And when you look at financial services, when you look at engineering, when you look at computer science, the differences that we're seeing there are not in physical strength or in the capacity to get pregnant or not, they are about intellectual capability. The research about men and women interest and intellectual capability shows that there are very clear, more overlap than differences.

Sophie Thomas: Is there anything we can do to level out the playing field and make all jobs accessible for everyone?

Libby Lyons: I think that the gender stereotyping starts the minute that we're born. We give baby girls dolls, we give baby boys Thomas the Tank Engine. So it starts the minute we're born and it doesn't finish until the day we die. And so we have to start challenging these assumptions that are with us through our whole life. We have to personally challenge them in ourselves, but also in others, about the fact that girls can't be mechanics, it's nonsense. Boys can't be nurses, it's nonsense. Women don't own the license to care. Men are great carers. They care differently if they're doing it on a one to one basis, that doesn't mean that they're bad at it, they just do it differently to the way women might do it. Men are great carers, men might great nurses.

Sophie Thomas: My dad's a nurse.

Libby Lyons: Yeah, exactly. And we need more male nurses and we need more male childcare workers. But in order to do that as a community, we have to start challenging ourselves and one another. So I think that, that's really, really important.

Sophie Thomas: Both Libby and Victor say there's a need for businesses to focus on walking the walk and not talking the talk.

Libby Lyons: Gender equality is a business issue. It's an important business issue, just like health and safety is and because it's a business issue, you can't just handball it to usually a woman in HR and say, "Here you go love, fix this." You've got to treat it as a business issue. You have to make sure that people are accountable for achieving outcomes. So in order to do that, you've got to have an action plan. You have to make people accountable for achieving those actions and in making them accountable, put it in their KPIs, hit them in the hip pocket if necessary, that if they achieve their KPIs, they get rewarded for it.

Libby Lyons: Everybody likes to be rewarded for doing the right thing, but what we do need to do in terms of this gender segregation is we need the female dominated industries to step up and take some serious positive action, at getting more men into the workplace. Now the male dominated industries, particularly the male dominated industry of mining, they have done this really, really well. They had one of the last gender pay gaps of any industry and they have been working really, really hard at getting more women into this male dominated industry.

Sophie Thomas: Men are sometimes worried that the push for gender equality in the workplace will mean fewer opportunities for them. But Libby says this is not the case.

Libby Lyons: It's all good for the economy, it grows the economy and I understand at times that men are fearful that they are going to have their jobs overtaken by women. That's not the case. As more women go into the workforce it puts more money into the economy for the benefit of everybody.

Victor Sojo: Actually having gender equity could be good for many things. The research shows that the work environments that are a little bit healthier, so in more gender balance places there is less harassment and bullying, work family practices, to create some kind of balance there are more effective. Organizations also have better governance and better corporate social responsibility when there are more women in positions of power.

Libby Lyons: This is the beauty of capturing the data. Overall things have got better. At the moment, we have more than 70% of all organizations that report into us, have a gender equality policy or strategy in place, that is fantastic. And we need to keep talking about things, educating, informing, putting the data out there, talking about the business case, talking about how to improve the economy of the country because we are seeing improvements.

Sophie Thomas: Today, we've seen how data can help to paint a picture of how the workforce is functioning for better or worse, and when it comes to gender inequality and gender segregation at work, the numbers are proving really hard to shift. So, we've heard from the experts. We've seen the data. Now it's up to businesses to take the next steps and shake up the gender divisions in the workplace.

Sophie Thomas: Thank you to our guests, Libby Lyons and Dr. Victor Sojo. You can subscribe to *Women are the Business* on Spotify or Apple podcasts for new episodes every fortnight. If you enjoyed this episode, don't forget to rate and review. For more insights on how women work and live, head to our website, fbe.unimelb.edu.au/womenarethebusiness.

Women are the Business is recorded on Wurundjeri land at the University of Melbourne, and sometimes, in my car. The podcast is produced by Seth Robinson, James Whitmore, and me, Sophie Thomas. It's recorded by Chris Hatzis, edited and mixed by Audiocraft's Camilla Hannan. The theme music comes from Epidemic Sounds.