



Women are the Business
Season 1: Episode 2
Women Should Go on a Chore Strike

Leah Ruppanner: Women need to go on a chore strike. They need to stop doing any of the housework for, let's say, a week to two weeks. I want you to let it all fall apart.

Sophie Thomas: Chores. Somebody has to do them, but everyone would prefer that it was someone else. I'm Sophie Thomas, and in this episode of Women are the business, we're talking about unpaid work, cooking, cleaning, caring for the kids, tasks that are essential for keeping people happy and healthy, but don't make us any money. You probably know who ends up doing a large chunk of this work: women. But research from the University of Melbourne shows that this phenomenon isn't unique to the home. Women also carry the load when it comes to office chores. Think taking notes in meetings, emptying the dishwasher, or planning the office Christmas party.

Leah Ruppanner: My name is Leah Ruppanner. I'm an associate professor of sociology, and the co-director of the Policy Lab at the University of Melbourne, and I'm particularly interested in what are the kinds of barriers that limit women's ability to engage more fully in the workforce, and impact upon their health and well-being.

Sophie Thomas: One of the things that Leah studies is the division of household labour. Data from the HILDA survey of Australian households, revealed that married women do on average twice as much housework and childcare as their husbands. The good news is that since 2002, women are actually doing about an hour less of housework each week, and men are doing an hour more, but it looks like it's going to take a very, very long time for men and women to do equal amounts.

Leah Ruppanner: One of the things we found is that yes, millennial men are spending more time on housework, but they're spending seven minutes more per day. Okay, that's not enough, right? If women are spending an hour or more per day, and men, this next generation have increased their time by seven

minutes, that's not nothing, but it is not enough to close the gender gap. And what you're seeing over time in fact, is that this gender gap is remaining pretty stable, pretty stagnant, and that it will take say, a hundred years at current rates to really close this gap.

Sophie Thomas: Before we go on, let's get something out of the way. Men do more paid work on average, which in turn, means they have higher incomes and often greater opportunities for career progression. And they do take part in housework, but rather than cleaning the bathroom, the data shows they are more likely to do outdoor tasks, like mowing a lawn, or fixing the letterbox, tasks that are stereotypically seen as masculine. They're also not usually essential for the survival of your home, and often more enjoyable.

Leah Ruppanner: You're saying, "Okay, here are some tasks that you do as a man, and you can do them at your leisure, and you can do them on the weekends, and you can do them when you want to do them." That is a different intensity around tasks that are essential, really. Right?

Sophie Thomas: It's often the essential tasks that fall to women.

Leah Ruppanner: You cannot not feed your child for four weeks, right? That is just the fact. You cannot not grocery shop for four weeks, or not do that kind of routine task, because people will die.

Sophie Thomas: So how does this gap come about? It starts when couples move in together.

Leah Ruppanner: Housework is most equal between men and women, when no one is living together. This makes sense, right? Because there's no one in the home to pick up after each other, you're responsible for your own house. Once heterosexual couples move in together, you start to see that housework becomes more gendered, women assume a larger share of the housework, and men do less. When people have babies, you see that housework goes up for everybody, right? So men do more, but women do significantly more.

Leah Ruppanner: So I often say to my undergraduates, if you are going to partner with someone the minute you move in, and you're going to do all these lovely things for them to show that you love them, you're going to cook them breakfast in bed, you're going to clean up, you're going to pick up your socks, you're going to make sure their laundry is neat and folded, and they have this beautiful space to come home to. If you are going to do that, be prepared to do that for the entire duration of your relationship. These are the norms that are going to get set. That's what the data shows, right? They are going to get set, and they're only going to worsen when you have kids.

Sophie Thomas: But even more interesting, is what happens to women who earn more than their male partners.

Leah Ruppanner: There is this tipping point where women become breadwinners, they start to do more. So couples have the most equal division of housework when they contribute equally to the finances. That's where you see the most equal

divisions. If women earn less, they do more. If women earn more, they do more.

Sophie Thomas: Let's pause for a moment, and step away from the house, because the same kind of things we see in household chores are happening in workplaces too.

Maria Recalde: So my name is Maria Recalde. I'm a lecturer in the Department of Economics at the University of Melbourne, and I am an experimental and behavioural economist. A lot of the work that I'm working on right now focuses on how to close gender gaps in the labour market.

Sophie Thomas: Maria studies tasks in the workplace that have to be done, but don't contribute to career progression. Things like taking notes in meetings, serving on a committee, or doing pro bono work in a law firm, like cooking and cleaning at home. Someone has to do these chores, and just like at home, usually that person is a woman. How does this happen? Maria's team created an experiment in their lab to find out.

Maria Recalde: We came up with a group task where we bring three people into the lab to interact via computer terminals. Essentially, they have a screen with a red button in front and a timer, and you have 120 seconds to decide whether or not you're going to click a button. The timer's counting back. If you click the button, you earn \$1.25, and everybody else in your group earns \$2. If nobody clicks the button, you earn \$1. It's clear that you'd prefer somebody else to click the button, right? So you get the \$2, but if you're sure nobody else will step up, you are actually perfectly okay doing it yourself, because 1.25 is better than \$1.

Sophie Thomas: What Maria found is that women are more likely than men to push the button. They're nearly 50% more likely to volunteer, and if you introduce a person who can ask someone else to do the task, just like a manager, women get 44% more requests, and to top it all off, women are 50% more likely to say yes. Basically, more women volunteer, more women get asked, more women say yes to doing office chores. The same thing happens outside the lab, such as in the university committees that Maria studied.

Maria Recalde: Out of 3000 plus faculty members, 7% of women volunteer, 2.6% of men volunteer for committee service. So even though only 25% of faculty members are women in that university, in that year, women represent 38% of committee members.

Sophie Thomas: Do you think that there is a link between this work that we do in the office, but then also the work that women do at home?

Maria Recalde: Yeah, definitely. So theoretically, the decision environment is very similar. So we all want the task to be performed, but we all prefer somebody else to do it. There are tons of tests like that at home related to housework, that have exactly the similar flavour. So think about who does the dishes, okay? One person needs to do the dishes, we don't all need to do the dishes at home. Who does the dishes? A lot of the time, at least in my experience, it's women. When men go on trips or live alone, or live with housemates who

are all men, they're perfectly okay doing the dishes. They can do the dishes themselves. Yet the [inaudible 00:07:46], this mixed gender environment at home, with mothers, and fathers, and siblings, it can be that woman end up doing the dishes, and the same thing can happen in who calls the plumber, who calls the bank and fixes the credit card problem, right? There's a lot of little things where you need one person to do a task, there's no special skill required, and who ends up doing these types of tasks? It can be women.

Sophie Thomas: So women do more chores at home and in the workplace. Part of the problem is that we don't place a monetary value on this labour, despite the fact that this work underpins our economy.

Leah Ruppanner: One of the things that's missing in conceptualizing unpaid work, is the way in which unpaid work really supports paid labour. So part of the reason why workers and children at home are able to show up and have an effective day, have lunches packed, clean clothes on, is in part because there's all this unpaid work being done at the home. So we assume that there's a certain amount of work that we need to be functional adults, functional children, functional members of society, and this work is often done by women.

Sophie Thomas: How does the amount of unpaid work that they do, how does it negatively impact on their career?

Leah Ruppanner: Okay. Unpaid work is intrinsically linked to paid work, and I think the way in which you can see this clearly, is what happens when the unpaid work becomes so big that you have to figure out what you're going to do about it. So what the data shows is that, okay, so you can imagine that women's labour force participation remains pretty much constant, almost on parity to men, but once you have kids, this is where you start to see the clear divide, right? That you start to see that actually women are much more likely to drop out, reduce, start working from home, start their own businesses, and this is in part because the unpaid work becomes so large, and there is no effective policy solution to take on that work.

Leah Ruppanner: Women reduce their employment at this very critical period of time in which they're building their careers, they're on an upward swing in terms of their trajectory, their fertility and their careers are escalating at exactly the same time. The results of that is they have this big burden that comes in, they step out of the labour market, and it's harder for them to re-step back in, especially if they have multiple children, so they'll have long gaps in employment. That's problematic, because skills deteriorate, connection to employers deteriorate, and workplaces move quite quickly. It's also problematic, because it reduces their ability to invest in superannuation. So they have a triple problem, right? They're not able to invest in their superannuation, they're not climbing the corporate ladder, giving them higher wages, and there are a lot of studies that show actually that a lot of women end up in retirement age, pensioner age, with zero superannuation. So they're at high risk for poverty.

Sophie Thomas: The burden of unpaid household labour stacks the deck against women throughout their lives. And what about those office chores? Let's look at

what happens in academia, where women are overrepresented on workplace committees.

Maria Recalde: For researchers, what matters for moving up the ladder and for getting tenure, it's research, citations, publications, grants. A lot of universities I visited in Europe told me that they have a system where, for example, in a hiring committee, when you interview candidates, there has to be a panel. They always had to have at least one woman or an equal representation of women. If to start with, you have a lower number of women in the university, then you're going to be over burdening a particular group, and it need not be women, it could also be minority candidates, right? Or other types of individuals. And so, if we need certain people in committees, in particular in hiring committees, we may want to compensate that time with some aid for research assistance or a teaching relief, or things like that so that you're not expecting people to have the same sort of rates of productivity, if one person has sort of less time to work on the things that will actually allow them to move up.

Sophie Thomas: To cut a long story short, the fact that women do more chores in the office means they have less opportunity to advance their careers. This might make it harder for women to get a promotion, which in turn, makes it harder for them to earn more. Throw in the effect having a baby, and you can see how chores might contribute to the wage gap, or having less women in leadership roles. There's also evidence that all this uncompensated work is bad for women's health.

Leah Ruppanner: We do have a study where we actually found that time pressure increases for women with the first birth, and then it doubles with the second. It increases for men as well, but it's twice the effect for women. So this feeling of time pressure, not having enough time to do the things you need to do, increases with first birth, doubles with the second. This increased time pressure associated with children that is disproportionately shared by women or mothers, explains their lower mental health. It's not that kids impose this drain because they're children, and they're just giant monsters that suck all your life energy away, it's because the expectations of what we need to do as parents intensify this time pressure. That's bad for women's health, bad for their emotional health, and emotional well-being. And we think this is actually something really important, right? We always talk about postnatal depression and what's happening in terms of mothers' mental health immediately following the baby, and what we're showing is actually in part, this is because there's this intensity of pressure on them coming from children.

Sophie Thomas: Why do women take on extra work around the house if it's bad for their health? Some people say they've evolved for it.

Leah Ruppanner: This is an issue about evolutionary psychology. Women were raised to be gatherers, therefore they're more predisposed to see the berries on the ground. Men are predisposed to be these hunters, so they can't see the berries, because they're focused on the prey. Okay. We found that was nonsense. Men can see the mess just as much as women can, and so this

biological idea that men cannot see mess, is not empirically supported in science.

Sophie Thomas: Leah was able to show this in an experiment where she asked men and women to evaluate clean and messy rooms. While there was no difference between the sexes when it came to seeing mess, she did find that women and men are judged differently when it comes to cleanliness.

Leah Ruppner: We asked all these questions about, okay, if someone just unexpectedly dropped into this room, what if Jennifer's boss unexpectedly dropped in? What if her mother-in-law unexpectedly dropped in? How would those people view Jennifer if her room were messy, and not about her just being messy, but her as an actual person? Do they see her as less competent? Do they see her as less capable? And what we found was yes, that if she has this messy room and someone drops in unexpectedly, that people anticipate she's going to experience a penalty for that. And so, there is this question about, why do women anger clean? Someone's about to come over, you have a dinner party and all of a sudden, you see there's this activation of gender roles and people are cleaning like crazy. It's not because women are insane or they have a higher preference for mess, it's because they know that that mess is going to reflect more poorly upon them than their male partner. So they're doing that to try to mediate some of this negative consequence that's going to come through.

Sophie Thomas: Maria found something similar in her button pushing experiment.

Maria Recalde: It's not like one group is better at clicking the button, it's beliefs about how likely others are to click the button that drives the result. If both men and women believe that women are more likely to click the button, then this is exactly what happens.

Sophie Thomas: In other words, it all comes down to gender norms. They are those standards and expectations about how men and women should actually, that are instilled in us from when we're children, like girls should wear pink dresses and play with dolls, and boys should wear blue overalls and play with trucks. But as Leah and Maria's research shows, those norms persist throughout our lives, and do all sorts of damage. Maria says knowing this is both a good and a bad thing.

Maria Recalde: It's complicated in the sense that changing gender norms outside of work, it's super hard. It's very difficult, and many papers have shown that norms persist over time and across generations. The reason I say it's promising in the workplace, is that you can change beliefs and expectations at work through simple rules or good bosses that sort of implement a way to allocate tasks, that perhaps, be equitable in the sense that everybody's time is taxed at the same rate, and with this types of tasks.

Maria Recalde: What we know some institutions have done, is implement quota systems. So it's a cap on the types of non-promotable tasks that you perform. So you're required to perform X number of tasks, if you go above it, you're not rewarded at all, if you don't fulfil your quota, you are also not okay. You're

sort of forcing a limit on the types of tasks anybody can perform, and that sort of allows the people burdened with the tasks who may be more likely to be women, to say, "My quota's full, I cannot do it anymore."

Sophie Thomas: And so, that sounds like from what you're saying, that the burden shouldn't just lie on women to tackle this problem. The individuals, it actually should be an organization, or managers in an organization.

Maria Recalde: Even men, right? If you're aware of this inequity and you know you've never actually written, put together the report, you can say, "Okay, I'll do it this time. I noticed you've done it all the time," right? So if we get men to step up a little bit more-

Sophie Thomas: Men to lean in.

Maria Recalde: Yes. But to lean in to the types of tasks they would normally lean out.

Sophie Thomas: Yeah. Maria says she doesn't want to encourage women to say no to work chores, as could have a negative impact on their careers, and she says it's important when we're talking about changing gender norms in the workplace, that the entire responsibility doesn't fall on women. But in the home, it's a different story.

Sophie Thomas: We've talked a lot about the problem, Leah, what are the solutions? What can women do?

Leah Ruppanner: Women need to go on a chore strike. I want you to let it all fall apart. The reason I want you to do this, is because in letting it fall apart, two things are going to happen. One, everyone else is going to become acutely aware of all the work you're doing that they were not aware of you doing, and this includes that mental load that women are often doing in the household, so they become acutely aware. Two, it allows you to redistribute the roles to actually sit down and have an accurate account of who's doing what, how, and when, and to divide it more equally. And three, I think importantly, is that there can be some acknowledgement about what actually is essential work and what is superfluous work, what really needs to be done in the household. Do you really need the tablecloths cleaned every week, or can it actually go every two or three weeks, and no one dies? What are the things that are essential, and what are the things that you're doing just because you're told you have to do it?

Sophie Thomas: There are also ways employers can encourage couples to share the load at home, which can be good for business too.

Maria Recalde: The idea of sharing housework is that if everybody contributes at home, then that's also going to free resources for women in the workplace. They can work a little bit more hours, they don't need to actually exit the labour market to stay at home, and maybe then try to get back in when the kids are grown up, and then it's actually very hard to get a job.

Leah Ruppanner: Workplaces need to acknowledge as both men and women have demands outside of work. So there need to be clear, consistent policies that address overwork, after work, and allow all employees, whether they have children or not, to accommodate any demands that come up at various times in the work day and throughout the year. Okay, and then the employers, the actual people who are in charge need to use these policies, because if they do not use the policies, then the workers are not going to use them.

Leah Ruppanner: And not just flexible work for those who have the most resources, those who are CEOs, or in white collar jobs, but allowing people who are actually the most vulnerable to labour market exits because they don't have the resources, they don't have the financial resources, they don't have the family support, and those populations too. So we could say, "Okay, corporations need to fix it all," but that's only going to get those who are in corporate jobs. We need actually support for all workers, those who are working at the Coles, those who are working all over because they require the support, and that's something that government has to do.

Sophie Thomas: It seems like workplaces are getting better when it comes to offering flexibility, but the kinds of workplaces that are getting better are all very... They're white collar, they're often firms and they're often based in the city. I just feel like there's probably a lot of people who are getting left out of the benefits of flexible work.

Leah Ruppanner: And then the other thing is that we have to acknowledge that work and family demands are experienced by those without children, and that they linger. So addressing the zero to four is not the only solution, right? Kids are demanding, they are draining, wonderful, but demanding and draining, and require energy at all life stages, from zero to 45.

Sophie Thomas: Leah says these changes wouldn't just benefit women, but extend to their partners, children, and the rest of society.

Leah Ruppanner: It is important to note that men have caregiving responsibilities as well. So these policies are actually, although often targeted towards women, this idea we don't want to lose our human capital through women, that what it actually does is it isolates men to carry that burden alone, and it makes them nervous about using these policies, and it makes it seem like this is just a woman's problem, that it's just all for women. It's not a woman's problem, this is actually a everyone problem. So it's important to stop thinking about gender equality as being about women, but gender equality is about creating healthy societies.

Sophie Thomas: Beautiful. Yeah.

Leah Ruppanner: Oh, I like that. I nailed that.

Sophie Thomas: Dang.

Leah Ruppanner: Nailed it.

Sophie Thomas: So, there we have it, when it comes to tackling the gender gap and unpaid work, there is a role for both governments and businesses, and women can try saying no to chores at home, or even go on strike. Thanks to our guests, Dr. Leah Ruppner And Dr. Maria Recalde. Subscribe to Women are the business for new episodes every second Wednesday. If you enjoyed this episode, don't forget to write and review. For more insights on how women work and live, head to our website, fbe.unimelb.edu.au/womenarethebusiness.

Sophie Thomas: *Women are the Business* is recorded on Wurundjeri land at the University of Melbourne. 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.