



Women are the Business
Season 1: Episode 8
Women Worldwide

Sophie Thomas: I'm Sophie Thomas and you're listening to the final episode of Women Are The Business. Throughout this series, we've talked about women's lives, both at home and in the office. In today's episode, we're going global and talking to two experts who work with women in the developing world. Women in developing nations face many of the same challenges as women in the west, as well as some that are uniquely their own. We're going to look at the numbers and the research and find out why it's important to acknowledge the diverse experience of women around the world.

Sarah Boyd: My name is Sarah Boyd, and at the moment, I'm the Director of Advocacy at Data2X.

Sophie Thomas: As an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne, Sarah studied commerce, focusing on economics and international trade.

Sarah Boyd: The story really starts when I was in high school and I had the opportunity to go on a study tour of China, to Beijing, and a few other cities with my Chinese language class in 1995. And that really opened my eyes to, I guess, the world outside our borders, and really opened, I guess, an interest for me in diplomacy and in understanding how other societies and economies in our region were working. I studied economics in high school because a very friendly teacher suggested that I might be interested. And at that point, studying commerce and arts initially with Chinese language, I guess as a way to explore my curiosity in understanding the world outside Australia. And that seemed to be the best way to explore as a framework for understanding how the world works.

Sophie Thomas: After completing a Master of International Development, Sarah went on to work in a range of diplomatic roles, including time spent with AusAID, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Oxfam. Now her role at Data2X is about sharing the insights that come from gender research and making sure this data is accessible.

Sarah Boyd: If we're talking about policymaking from a government perspective, or if we're talking about advocating for policy change from a civil society perspective, those endeavours are really most effective when they're building on evidence. So, if we're talking about the experience of a particular woman in India or Venezuela the data and evidence that we have on women's lived experience, which often comes from women's rights organizations and civil society organizations. That will help guide that policymaking.

Sophie Thomas: Gender has been a focal point for your career. Is that something that you always had an interest in through your working life?

Sarah Boyd: I came to see clearly as I continued my study in more of the traditional economics, and then in my development studies work that gender began to be an essential lens through which to understand economic, social, political dynamics. And I think as I began to work more, especially in South Asia and Southeast Asia, I began to see and study and observe not just the often disproportionate impact of say conflict and humanitarian crises, but also just how powerful women's roles were in organizing and civil society and the different kind of impact they had when they had access to power and making decisions.

Increasingly that became a centre of my work when I realized that, especially in any development context and certainly looking at issues of peace and conflict, you can't understand those contexts without considering the questions of gender.

Sophie Thomas: I'm wondering from your own personal experience, what you think the biggest roadblocks are to true gender equality that the world is facing.

Sarah Boyd: Two things really jump out. And that firstly is around violence against women, which is an issue in every single country to different extents. And a related issue to ending violence against women is around having more women in public and political life at every level. And those two issues I think are critically related, violence can be a preventive for women to run for public office and stay in public office. And also having more women and a diverse set of women in public office at every level enables different kinds of policymaking.

Sophie Thomas: Our next guest is a researcher who can show us why evidence is so important and how data can be used to help more women stay at work in the developing world.

Diana Contreras Suarez: I'm Diana Contreras Suarez, I'm a research fellow at the Melbourne Institute for Applied Economics and Social Research. I do development economics, and what that basically means is I like using statistic tools to look at problems that affect people in disadvantage, mainly in developing countries. I grew up in Bogota, Colombia. While I was over there, I used to witness so much poverty and disadvantage, and I always got very interested about why, why is causing type of problem and I always wanted to work on ways of finding a solution for it.

Sophie Thomas: Can you run us through how women's working lives in developing countries might be similar or different to the working lives of women in already developed countries?

Diana Contreras Suarez: So, there are differences in the way women maybe need to work. So if you think of a developing economy, if you are very poor, you need to work because you need to eat. So therefore, you can think of these as a survival type of employment. Once you move to the other end of the spectrum, where you have developed countries, where women could have more flexibility of choosing if they want to work or not. In both cases, they are going to face different challenges. But something that is common in developing or developed countries is the fact that child-bearing always affects women. So, this is common and maybe the magnitude of the effect it's higher in some places than others, but this is constant all over the world.

Sophie Thomas: As we've seen throughout this series, having a child is often the big moment where the inequalities between men and women widened significantly. To find out how childbirth affects women working in developing nations. Deanna looked at data from Indonesia.

Diana Contreras Suarez: So, when I finished my PhD, I got a job. And then part of the job was to do some research in collaboration with an agency, which is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Indonesia. And what they wanted to do was to look at what was the situation of women or gender inequality in Indonesia. So we were looking at different domains, and one of them was what was their situation in the labour market? So this project started from that. And my interest from it was understanding how this is a big issue in many countries where women have been improving their education levels. Women have been improving their health status and still there are inequalities in those areas. The one that we were seeing more differentials was in the labour force participation.

And it was interesting that Indonesia has been a country that has been growing so rapidly in the last 30 years. And it was very puzzling, the fact that we didn't see that change be reflected in the way women were benefiting from it in terms of labour market participation. So as a result of that, we were studying what were the drivers of this kind of stagnant female labour force participation. Once we have information of women and we are able to chart them over their life cycles, we can estimate what's the proportion of those women who are leaving or what happened with them when they have the first child. And what we found was very surprising that most of those women were actually just leaving the labour market altogether. If you think of this evidence, you can think of its maybe that provision of childcare would help women to come back to work or other facilities who help them to take care of kids.

Sophie Thomas: And what would be the benefits to Indonesia, if more women did work?

Diana Contreras Suarez: A very direct effect is if you have more people who are very well skilled and well-trained contributing to their economy, you can think that productivity

will increase and therefore growth of the country will increase. And that would benefit the economy.

You also can think of an indirect effect, which is if more women are able to participate in the labour market or to stay in their jobs when they want to, there is research that has shown that female participation increases their bargaining power within their households, and that also has positive effects on their children.

Sophie Thomas: Can you talk us through some of the potential policy solutions that you have identified?

Diana Contreras Suarez: So, we have been thinking that one of the main solution that could be beneficial is allowing women to work flexible time. You can think of flexibility in terms of starting shifts at different times, so then it accommodates better to when they need to drop off kids at school or these kind of events, or you can think of part time where women only work for three days a week, or whatever, in a way that also that they will receive all the benefits from a full time employment. So, they will have access to health care and all the other benefits.

Another way that we have thought that it could be worth trying is providing mentoring programs, where women who are returning to work are paired up with other women who have kids and who are still working. So then they can share their experiences of what is to manage, having a family at home, and also the challenges of being back at work. There are other programs that we are also considering, which is retention bonuses or incentives for women to return to employment once they have the children, so then they come back.

And we need to also consider that these kinds of changes have to be accompanied by other social and cultural changes. And this is more difficult to regulate. You cannot impose a policy of how households within them are supposed to share the housework. And this is a problem that is faced, not only in Indonesia, but all around the world, because women work at their jobs and also they work at their homes. And it's just too much.

Sophie Thomas: Sarah, I'm wondering what you think the role is of developed countries when it comes to getting involved in helping or providing aid to developing countries.

Sarah Boyd: I guess there are a number of components to this. And what I would say is, the evidence is increasingly clear that one of the most effective ways that partners, be they governments or private foundations or philanthropists or civil society organizations, supporting the grassroots work of women's rights organizations and women's rights networks and human rights defenders, is often one of the most effective ways to, I guess, support the local or indigenous work that is happening. And now that of course is not a homogenous thing. What a feminist movement or a women's rights movement looks like in one country, can look like many things.

The second thing I would say is that one really important role that donor governments like Australia play and can play is helping to translate those commitments to other countries. So, for instance, one of the ways that a number of donors might support that is helping to build up, what's called the gender machineries, which seems to be a funny term, but for instance, the gender equality ministries or departments in government.

Diana Contreras Suarez: So, most of this works through the aid programs. And as far as I understand, the way Australia has decided to pursue their aid to developing countries is, in particular to Indonesia, is to provide them instead of infrastructure, which they did in the past very strongly, now it's to provide them with technical support in a way that will help them tackle the problems that they are interested in tackling. So instead of this type of aid where you would have this paternalistic view where one country goes to another one and tells them, "Oh, this is what you should do." It's a more collaborative way where they really want to provide assistance in what they want to tackle.

And if you're thinking from a altruistic point of view, it's part of the responsibility of making sure that our neighbouring countries are well off and that's not only good for them, but it's also at the end, good for Australia as well, that they prosper and they flourish. And everyone within the country is also able to flourish in their capacities and in the ways they want to participate.

Sophie Thomas: What about individual action? So say a woman heard this podcast and they thought, I actually would like to get involved somehow in helping women in developing countries.

Diana Contreras Suarez: Well, I think that there are very different ways that individuals can work on these areas. Let's say my way of helping in this area is through my research, but way that is more close to the public is you can think of many organizations that are willing to contribute and study and do advocacy for these type of problems. Which in many instance is not that people don't want to change or they don't care, it's just people don't know, or people don't know what they can do. And because it's human nature to be reluctant to change, it just takes a lot of effort, and these things take time. So if people want to promote women and fairness in the way they can access opportunities from economies, I think it is a great opportunity to be able to join organizations who are willing to advocate for these causes.

Having said that, I think those organizations also require to have clear evidence that whatever they are advocating for actually works and actually it's for the benefit of those women, because there is evidence of many programs that they have very good intentions, but in reality, and in practice, they have very harming consequences for the women they are trying to help. You can participate in those organizations, but also to be a little bit critical on what are the actions that the organizations are supporting?

Sophie Thomas: When it comes to achieving true gender equality, we need to remember that developed nations also have a long way to go.

Sarah Boyd:

The idea that we've achieved equality we know is not true because we know that women are dying at the hands of their intimate partners every week in Australia. We know about issues in the economic sphere, around the gender pay gap. We know about so many issues across social, political, economic life, where we have these big gaps and we still have a lot of work to do. And I think if we take, let's say an intersectional lens and think about if we're looking in Australia, or if we're looking in other lower and middle income countries, you will always find I guess, a diversity of experience. Big, really big factors, the impact of conflict and displacement, that results from climate change, from conflict and humanitarian emergencies, when we're talking about tens of millions of people worldwide every year, and that experience is disproportionately born by women.

Sophie Thomas:

These are big global questions. And as we've learned over the last season of Women Are The Business, there aren't really any easy answers. Where we might find a glimmer of hope and a chance to make a more equal world for everyone is by listening, to the numbers, to the facts, to the experts, and of course, to each other.

Thank you to today's guests, Sarah Boyd and Dr Diana Contreras Suarez, and to all our guests throughout the season. And thank you to you, our listeners. To catch up on our previous episodes or see more content from the Women Are The Business series, you can head to our website, fbe.unimelb.edu.au/womenarethebusiness. We hope you've enjoyed the show and maybe even taken away a few nuggets of expert advice to apply in your own life.

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 and edited and mixed by Audio Craft's Camilla Hannon. The theme music comes from Epidemic Sounds.