



**ECON-19: Inside the Corona Crash**  
*Season 1: Episode 5*  
*She-cession*

James Whitmore: Usually, in a recession, it's the industries where more men work that are hardest hit, but the coronavirus recession is a bit different. It's the first recession in 50 years where women have lost more jobs. I'm James Whitmore and you're listening to ECON-19 a podcast from the University of Melbourne that takes you inside the economics of the coronavirus pandemic. In this episode, we're talking about why this economic crisis is hitting women particularly hard. It's not just jobs either, from childcare to lockdown, this recession is a perfect storm.

Lisa Cameron: I'm Lisa Cameron. I'm a Professorial Research Fellow at the Melbourne Institute of Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. I lead the institute's team working on disadvantage and wellbeing in the Asia-Pacific. By training, I'm an empirical micro-economist, which means that I use data to examine economic issues and evaluate economic and social policy. And I've done a lot of work in Indonesia, some work on China, Timor-Leste, and other countries in the region. And I also work on these topics in the context of Australia. I am particularly interested in the wellbeing of marginalized or disadvantaged groups, and that includes researching the wellbeing of women and the economics of gender. This recession associated with the coronavirus pandemic is the first of eight economic downturns in the past 50 years in which a greater proportion of jobs have been lost by women than by men. So it's really unusual in that respect.

Globally, women make up 39% of global employment, but in this pandemic, they've accounted for 54% of overall job losses. So women are estimated to have been about 1.8 times more likely to lose their job. That's from a report by McKinsey and Partners. In the US, it's a similar story with 11.5 million women having lost their jobs versus approximately 9 million men. With job losses being worse for black, Asian, and Hispanic women. And in the UK, it's estimated that mothers are 23% more likely to have lost their jobs than men. And you see very similar patterns in Australia. So there's a report by Equity Economics that looks at the effect of the pandemic in Australia, on

women. And the reason it's hitting women more is because women are in the industries that have been most severely affected. So that's sectors like, well all service sectors, but it's travel, leisure, hospitality, retail, arts, and entertainment. And these sectors employ about 244,000 women. They also employ 210,000 men.

But in Australia, although women make up about 47% of the labor force, so slightly less than half of the labor force in terms of the number of workers, 53% of total job losses were experienced by women. And that's nationally. And of course, Victoria has been more adversely affected by the pandemic than the other states. So 61% of total job losses in Victoria were experienced by women. So women have just been a lot more adversely affected in this pandemic-related recession.

James Whitmore: So you mentioned that this is a bit of an unusual situation for recessions. Why is this recession so different?

Lisa Cameron: It's because it's triggered by the pandemic and it's triggered by the lockdown to try and cope with the pandemic. And the lockdowns in Australia, and mostly around the world, have allowed sectors like the construction industry to keep working to some extent. Whereas retail's been shut down, and travel's been shut down. And women are concentrated in the service sector. So that's why women are being adversely affected. So, if you look at construction, then men dominate the construction sector. Although construction does apparently employ about 169,000 women, but that's up to 340,000 men. So yeah, it's just the sectors that have been affected, they're the ones in which a lot of women work.

James Whitmore: There's been a lot of discourse in the media about the policy responses, and we've just had the budget recently, have these things made things better for women or more difficult?

Lisa Cameron: What I can say, definitively, is the budget could have done a lot more for women than it has. Because reading the budget papers, it very much seems as though, in designing the budget response, the federal government had the 1990s or early recessions in mind because they've come up with responses which have been tried in response to previous recessions. So, they're looking at doing a lot of construction, building infrastructure. That's great if your recession is caused by a contraction, or a consequence of the recession is a contraction in construction, but that's not the case here. So we've seen an infrastructure-heavy budget focused on building, and that's just not going to help women. Less than 1.5% of all women workers, this is in a particular age group, those aged 45 to 54, working construction or mining or machinery operators compared to 14% of men in the same age category. So, to the extent that you're boosting the construction industry, that's going to be great for jobs for men. So there will be an economic stimulus associated with that, but it's just not going to help women.

James Whitmore: So what would you like to see? What's on your policy bucket list?

Lisa Cameron: Another thing that's very different this time round than in the early 1990s, is that women are now over-represented on JobSeeker or what was Newstart. So that's the benefits for people who don't have a job. In the 1990s, men were over-represented as Newstart recipients. Whereas now, it's women and it's older women, middle-aged or older women. So, one thing I would've liked to have seen would be a permanent increase in the rate of JobSeeker payments, just as a safety net for those women. Another thing I would have liked to see, which is probably even more important, is that I would have liked to have seen a focus of the stimulus package on the sectors that have been affected. So the service sectors, particularly aged care and childcare. So aged care, they had a great potential to increase female employment.

So, seeing through the pandemic that aged care needs a bit of attention, and that there have been a lot of deaths clustered in aged care, and their response to the aged care sector has been less than adequate. And a lot of that has been put down to poor quality standards in aged care. So, in the same way that you'd invest in physical infrastructure, you can invest in the care sector. So, by channeling money and funding into the aged care sector, that would have generated jobs. The majority of those jobs would have been for women because women make up the majority of workers in that sector. So it would have had a number of benefits in that it would have improved the quality of the aged care sector, and it would have provided further female employment. And there have been estimates of the returns to investing in aged care versus the return to investing in construction. The other sector that I thought is worthy of attention in the budget is childcare because the childcare sector employs a lot of women, so that would assist with women's employment.

And also, of course, childcare is just central to so many issues faced by working women. So, by providing childcare, not only do you employ women, but you also make it much easier for women working in other sectors to work effectively.

James Whitmore: It's interesting you're talking about focusing on sectors that have a high proportion of female employment. But more broadly than that, is there, not just in the pandemic recovery, but over longer periods of time, is this all sort of an argument for improving the balance between men and women working in different sectors?

Lisa Cameron: Yeah. I think if you take a longer-term view, that's what you want to do. So, provision of affordable childcare helps you in that respect. More generous paternity leave helps because it helps fathers to take on their share of household responsibilities. Flexible working hours allow women and men to juggle working in the home and working outside the home. All those kinds of things really assist in terms of getting women into work force and allowing them to achieve their full potential.

James Whitmore: Like so much of this pandemic, it's kind of exposed problems that were already present, really.

Lisa Cameron: Yeah, that's right. And it's exacerbated, hopefully in the short-term, existing problems, because of course we've had all the school closures. So I think it's estimated that about 1.5 billion children around the world were home from school. And that's created problems for working mothers and fathers, those who are still either working at home or needing to get out of the house to work. And while that burden has fallen on mothers and fathers, there is evidence that it's fallen, disproportionately, on mothers. You could see that in a number of ways. You can see it when you look at mental health statistics, you can also see it in a kind of more narrower view. There are articles examining the rates of journal submissions of academic women versus academic men, and apparently journal submissions by women have now fallen relative to that of men. So that's a direct hit on academic women's productivity, presumably driven by women who have younger children. It's just been very difficult to work at home when you have to homeschool at the same time and also just manage children's behavior and their interests.

James Whitmore: Yeah. It's a lot of work and I'm just imagining 1 billion children in Zoom backgrounds.

Lisa Cameron: Yes. I've seen a bit of that.

James Whitmore: We all have. So, we're talking about working in the home, can you talk us through some of the sort of unexpected impacts of lockdowns and quarantine?

Lisa Cameron: Figures for Australia show that 40% of frontline workers have reported increases in reports of domestic violence. And 70% reported increases in complex cases. Globally, there have been reports of increases between 25 to 50% in domestic violence as a result of the pandemic. Yeah, so when you have families in lockdown, you can't get out, I think that's stressful for everyone. If you're in a bit of a fraught situation the potential for domestic violence just becomes very difficult. It's difficult, in that situation, for people to get away from each other to cool down. It's also difficult for women to access services because to access services they're going to have to make a phone call or do something online. And if the partner is at home, it just becomes that little bit more difficult. So yeah, that's another concern arising from lockdown. So lockdown has positive impacts in terms of the progression of the virus, but negative impacts, obviously, economically, but also in terms of things like domestic violence.

Also, if we talk internationally and talk about developing countries then, and actually it's not just limited to developing countries, but there been unexpected, well, actually not unexpected, unexpected if you haven't come across them before, but quite familiar impacts for those who are familiar with the Ebola pandemic in Africa around 2015. So what's been observed in many countries is that, as a result of lockdown, you have a loss of employment. But then for women and for men, but women, particularly pregnant women, are affected by an inability or increased difficulty in accessing health services. So access to maternity services becomes more difficult if you're in lockdown. So you might miss an appointment, or you

might have to go to an online appointment rather than an in-person appointment if you're in a developed country. And as a result, women have been not having the full schedule of prenatal visits. So, there have been increases in rates of stillbirth.

In Nepal, for example, the number of, well, it even extended to whether you made it to the hospital to give birth. So the number of hospital births or the share of hospital births halved, and the number of stillbirths increased from 14 per a thousand births to 21 per a thousand births. So that's a 50% increase, which is pretty amazing. And similar steps have been found in India. And, somewhat surprisingly, the rate of stillbirths has also increased in London and in Scotland.

James Whitmore: How do the different work structures in the developing world expose women to the pandemic in ways that might be different to countries like Australia?

Lisa Cameron: Like Australia, women have been disproportionately affected, but the structure of the labor market in developing countries is really different. So, women are over-represented in the informal sector in developing countries. So the informal sector means that you're working for yourself, you might have one employee, but often we're thinking about women who go and buy some fruit and veg and then sell that in the streets. Just very small scale enterprises, they might be selling all sorts of food or other items or doing very small scale manufacturing or textile work within the home. So, in those kinds of jobs, there's not much in the form of a safety net.

So, workers in those jobs, generally, don't have access to unemployment benefits, they don't have sick leave. So when something like a pandemic comes along, they just lose their income. And particularly, we're thinking of the type of informal sector employment that women are involved in because men are involved in informal sector employment too. Women's informal sector often involves social interactions. So you've got women out in the street selling things. So, of course, when you're locking down you're trying to reduce social interactions. That really negatively impacts those sectors.

James Whitmore: So what kind of policies could be used in these places to create a safety net?

Lisa Cameron: What a lot of countries have done is they have relied on existing transfer schemes. And that actually hasn't been such a bad idea. So, conditional cash transfers are very popular in developing countries. So these are cash transfers normally made to the woman in the household, the mother of children often. And they're payments made maybe monthly or quarterly on the condition that children attend school, that they get all their vaccinations, that for pregnant women, that they attend prenatal checkups and those kinds of things. So, what a lot of countries have done is, because they've already got those programs in place, what they've done is they've just rolled out extra payments to households. So I think that, well, it remains to be seen, but that seem to me to be quite a sensible strategy. Some countries have put particular systems in place to try and cover informal workers.

So conditional cash transfers provide a transfer regardless of the type of work or that the family's involved in. In Thailand and Peru, and I don't know very much about their schemes, but I read that they've introduced, as a result of the pandemic, in response to that, they've introduced income replacement measures that specifically cover informal workers, including domestic workers. So that's maids and so forth. So they're specifically trying to cover the informal sector. It is possible to cover informal sector workers if you have a longer-term view. There are examples in India, there's the Self Employed Women's Association or SEWA. And what they do, they require an annual small membership payment from women working in the informal sector. And because they're able to access a large number of women working in the informal sector, they're able from these small made payments, to provide life insurance, health insurance, asset and loan insurance, and maternity leave, paid maternity leave, for more than 30,000 women across Indonesia. So these are women working in the informal sector.

So it is possible, not in the short-term, if you're just responding immediately to a pandemic, but if you take a longer-term view, which we should be doing now since we've experienced Ebola and now we're experiencing COVID-19. It is possible to set up schemes that do provide some kind of safety net for informal sector workers.

James Whitmore: It's interesting, the things that you're talking about, they sound like things that we should kind of be doing anyway.

Lisa Cameron: Yes. I think that's a lesson that we probably should have learned already, but to the extent that we haven't, we can learn now, that we're likely to experience a situation similar to this again in the future. So we should get ourselves prepared for that by putting these systems in place.

James Whitmore: Yeah. And it might not be a disease, I suppose it could be any sort of natural disaster.

Lisa Cameron: Yeah, that's right. It could be climate change-related.

James Whitmore: We've talked a lot about the negative impacts of the pandemic and the recession on women. Are there any positives?

Lisa Cameron: A possible upside is that in its initial form, JobKeeper and JobSeeker, but JobKeeper paid a flat rate. So it paid \$1,500 per fortnight, regardless of what you were earning prior to the pandemic. So, that was one small silver lining, I thought, for women because a lot of women are more likely to work part-time than men. So women probably benefited in the short-term from that flat rate, that flat payment. Now, it's been changed to, well, anyone receiving JobKeeper receives somewhere between 1200 and \$750 per fortnight.

And now it's dependent on the number of hours you work. And I think some people, both men and women, although it's been very difficult working at home if you have children, working from home does have benefits in terms

of allowing you to juggle your home and work responsibilities. So, avoiding the commute in and out from work will have benefited some women. And I think also just spending time with children, as taxing as it can be, it's also often enjoyable, and it's nice to share that time. But really, I can't think of any other specific positive impacts.

James Whitmore: Yeah. It's a pandemic.

Lisa Cameron: It's nice to look for a silver lining though.

James Whitmore: Yeah. It's not particularly great. It's interesting that you're talking about JobKeeper and JobSeeker, it's kind of like solving the gender pay gap at a stroke for [crosstalk 00:19:21].

Lisa Cameron: That's right, purer equality.

James Whitmore: How easy was that?

Lisa Cameron: Yeah. Well, also with the provision of childcare for a short period, how easy was that? All of a sudden childcare was free.

James Whitmore: I feel that's one of the lessons of this, isn't it? All these policies that seem so hard politically, suddenly became really easy.

Lisa Cameron: Yes. But that's also, I think, the reason for disappointment in that I think that the federal budget missed a great opportunity because normally there's a lot of concern about the bottom line. So, spending however much is needed to improve the quality of aged care might seem just too expensive in a regular budget. But in this budget, it was quite achievable. If you look at the amount that was spent on tax cuts, if that money had been dedicated to aged care and other sectors you'd end up with a very high quality aged care sector. And you'd end up with a bounce for female employment at a time when it's possible to make a big decision like that. And now that we've missed that opportunity, it's difficult to see when that opportunity will arise again.

James Whitmore: Is it a bit frustrating to be a researcher in your position and, obviously, producing a lot of work that makes suggestions about policy and measures how policies are working to see governments just go and do things that don't make a lot of sense?

Lisa Cameron: It is frustrating, but of course, there are always people on both sides of the divide, even within academia. So, you can't claim that you necessarily have all the answers. What I find the most frustrating about this budget is there was a lot of discussion prior to the budget about how women had borne the brunt of the impact of the pandemic. And there were a lot of suggestions from a whole range of different people and organizations about how you could assist women overcome these economic difficulties while also assisting men. And what I find the most frustrating is that the budget seems to have paid no attention whatsoever to those arguments. So, one thing that comes out of this, if you look at the UN report recently on the impacts

of the pandemic, or just think about it generally, is that we know that this pandemic affected women disproportionately.

So, the response of the government has been that this budget is not anti-women, that women are free to access all of the new policies and funds available onto the budget, but that doesn't recognize that there are differences between men and women. And if you're supporting the construction sector, then very few women are going to benefit from that. So what I think is really important for governments to do is to provide gender desegregated data, collect gender desegregated data, and provide gender desegregated statistics that can guide their policies. One of my striking things is, if you look at the parliament of Australia's COVID-19 response publications, they don't address gender at all. There's a report on the COVID-19 impacts on casual workers in Australia, a statistical snapshot. And it does not present any data desegregated by gender. So, I think that's just not satisfactory in this day and age.

And I think we used to, my understanding is, there used to be requirements that data was desegregated by gender and the Abbott Government wound those requirements back. So I think it's really important, from here on in, that governments think about gender when they're designing policies. So, just conduct a check of all of the things they're putting forward and how they're likely to affect women versus aid men. Because you'd hope that the lack of attention to women in the budget wasn't intentional. I think it probably wasn't intentional, but it reflects just a lack of awareness of gender more generally and the differential impacts on men and women.

James Whitmore: I think it's interesting that a lot of these things that you're suggesting like aged care, childcare, all those things, they're just better for society in general, right?

Lisa Cameron: Yes. They benefit everyone, but they do involve a cultural shift. And that's why it's a change of social norms, particularly in the workplace. And that is often difficult for employers to comprehend. Often there are short-term costs associated with such changes. So that provides disincentive for business in the short-term. But research has shown that in the longer-term, businesses generally benefit by having a more equal balance of male and female workers.

James Whitmore: The coronavirus recession has been particularly hard on women, but as we've heard, the solutions could make a fairer society for everyone. From childcare to welfare, these are policies that will help families share the load and provide a safety net for those who can't work. Thanks to our guest, professor Lisa Cameron. And if you're interested in these issues, you can check out our Women are the Business podcast, a deep dive into all the issues that affect women at work. Subscribe to ECON-19 for new episodes. For more insights on the economics of the coronavirus, head to our website, [fbe.unimelb.edu.au/econ19](http://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/econ19). ECON-19 is recorded on Wurundjeri land. The podcast is produced by Seth Robinson and me James Whitmore. The theme music comes from PremiumBeat.

