



Women are the Business

Season 1: Episode 5

Women v COVID-19

Leah Ruppanner:

All of a sudden when you have this pandemic, you start to see where in society where the gaps are. Where are we hanging on by a thread.

Sophie Thomas:

I'm Sophie Thomas and you're listening to Women are the Business. Once again, we're not in the studio, we're coming to your ears remotely. Today we're talking about what's behind all the remote work, the COVID-19 pandemic. In this episode, we're diving into the broader effects of this crisis to see how it's shaking up women's lives at home and at work. As we'll hear, the pandemic presents huge challenges for gender equity, but also an opportunity to change things for the better. We spoke to two University of Melbourne experts on Zoom calls.

Leah Ruppanner:

I'm Leah Ruppanner, Associate Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of-

Ava (Leah's Daughter):

Momma, I'm hungry.

Leah Ruppanner:

Okay, hold on. I'll be right back.

Sophie Thomas:

You might remember Leah from episode two, where she encouraged women to go on a tool strike.

Leah Ruppanner:

My name is Leah Ruppanner. I'm an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Co-Director of The Policy Lab. My research focuses on gender, work, and families, and in particular I often look at unpaid domestic work.

Sophie Thomas:

We know from data collected by the HILDA Survey of Australian households, that women do more unpaid work at home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought all of these issues to a head.

Leah Ruppner:

All of that invisible work that women are doing now becomes incredibly visible because kids are at home, everyone's at home, no one can go to work. And what happens with all that unpaid labor in the home now is up in the air. So, I thought that the care crisis would come with the aging population, with the fact that baby boomers were going to really become this kind of population that was going to need a lot of care, and that families or governments were going to have to step in. What I didn't anticipate was that COVID-19 was going to come and bam, just hit us in the face and show everything that we've been talking about for decades in a day. This is a crisis, right? It's unsustainable. People cannot keep carrying this load indefinitely.

Sophie Thomas:

Of course, the pandemic reaches far beyond the home. It's shaking entire industries, and this too is affecting women and men differently.

Leah Ruppner:

I think COVID-19 will have a very clear gender it affects. The way in which I see that occurring in the future, and of course we'll wait for data and economic predictions, but it'll be interesting to see which types of industries tend to be shut down. We're anticipating that probably the industries that are going to take a long time to recover are going to be those in which they are female dominated. That would be something like tourism or retail work, where you disproportionately have a larger share of women.

Sophie Thomas:

The other thing that's also interesting is that a lot of the people who are on the front lines, health care workers, age care workers, childcare workers, who are actually sort of fighting this pandemic, are also women.

Leah Ruppner:

Yeah, absolutely. And in addition to highlighting the care crisis, it's also highlighted the fact that these are really essential jobs, and essential jobs for the economy. And so, how we value them, how we view them and how we treat them, hasn't been equivalent to all their jobs that you might say are really essential to the function of our society.

Sophie Thomas:

Let's step back from the immediate crisis and look at where the pandemic fits into the bigger picture when it comes to progress and gender equality.

Susan Ainsworth:

Hi, I'm Susan Ainsworth. I'm an Associate Professor in Management at the University of Melbourne, and I teach and I research in the areas of diversity management and organizational communication and behaviour.

Sophie Thomas:

Diversity is one of those corporate words that's been buzzing around since the 1990's, it's one of the major strategies businesses have used to increase the number of women in the workplace.

Advocates for diversity argue that businesses shouldn't just employ women and other minorities because it's the law, but because it's good for the bottom line. Susan has been researching this trend for more than a decade.

Susan Ainsworth:

It's been interesting for me to see the cycles of interest in diversity, because it has gone in and out of session. And what we've seen in the last few years is very much it coming back into fashion, and often people treating it as if it's a new thing, when actually it's not a new thing, we've been doing this in Australia at least for 24 years, right? Or longer, 25 years. But one of the things that I really want people to understand is that progress isn't linear. And we do go through periods of progressive social reform that is followed by a retraction to that reform or cutting back from that reform and more conservative periods.

Susan Ainsworth:

And so, the arguments that people used to make, for example in 1995, about, well, it's inevitable that business will save a lot and hire more women, because it's logical, because there's good reasons to do it, because how can you cut out 50% of the talent and still be an effective organization? There'll be a critical mass of women that gets hired and it will inevitably lead to greater equity and better outcomes. Now that clearly didn't happen, so this idea that somehow progress in all of these areas is inevitable, is a very dangerous one from my perspective, because it doesn't take account of what we know from history and recent social history of the past few decades about how things can be wound back. And if things aren't embedded in a very institutionalized way, they're often the first to go in times of crisis.

Sophie Thomas:

So, when you talk about progress being nonlinear and sort of moving cyclically, where do you think we are right now in that phase in 2020?

Susan Ainsworth:

I think we're at the start of a backlash. There has been so much media attention, corporate attention, to diversity over the past couple of years that we're starting to see it turn, we're starting to see people turn off from it. And the problem is that there has been a lot of talk about diversity and a lot of rhetoric, but that hasn't necessarily translated into change on the ground. So people are sick of talking about it or sick of hearing about it, and so they want to move on to the next new thing. It's our sort of predilection for novelty, things come in and out of fashion. Well the problem is if things come into fashion again, they're going to go out. And I think that's where we are in the cycle, we're at the tipping point of it about to go out of fashion and to face the backlash. And I think that, that backlash will be exacerbated by the whole circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

Sophie Thomas:

Interesting, why is that?

Susan Ainsworth:

Because businesses under crisis and people in crisis will revert to what they know. So, anything that seems like it is an experiment or innovating or trying new things or an extra program that you brought on and you were trialling, that will go, people will refer back to predictable behaviour because they feel unsafe. In addition to which, a lot of businesses are looking to radically cut budgets and diversity will be seen as a nice to have but not a must have.

Susan Ainsworth:

So here we have a great social experiment that we would never have had otherwise, and managers as well as employees are having to come to grips with, "How do we work remotely?" Which means that managers will be experiencing, "Hang on a minute, there are things possible here that I never thought would be and would never have come about without this situation and the circumstances we find ourselves in." So what I would really hope is that coming out of this, businesses rethink how people use their time, they don't confuse presence in the office with productivity, and they're much more open, not just in policy, but in practice, to people working more flexibly. And recognizing that people have a life outside of work that might impinge on their work just as work impinges on their home life.

Sophie Thomas:

How might this social experiment end? In spite of all the horrors the pandemic is causing around the world, could it also be a turning point? An opportunity to change things for the better?

Susan Ainsworth:

There's been quite a lot around in the last six months for example, about how anxious women are, the lack of sleep they think that they get, and also their use of alcohol to de-stress, so self-medicating in order to cope with all of the demands on them all the time. And I think it's really disturbing. What I would hope that would come out of the situation that we're in now, is that people are able to sit back and think about, "Is this the sort of life that we want? Is there a different way of doing it? What's really important?" And for businesses to take that up as well, "Is it actually necessary for people to be on site five times a week? Is it actually more effective and more efficient and more humane to allow flexibility, and to really support that flexibility and habit, not stigmatized, across all the workforce and practiced by managers themselves?" So the impact on diversity of the current situation, COVID-19, might be very mixed. I think where we might get some progress is around work flexibility and working from home and work-life balance.

Leah Ruppner:

And what we need now is organizations post-COVID pandemic, who identify that there are alternative ways to work, and to codify these into their workplace policies. And the challenge is going to be that there is going to be an intensity or a desire to get back to normal, and there's going to be an intensity or desire to minimize costs. And we need to keep in mind that this desire to make an economic shortfalls should not be at the expense of workers and their caregiving responsibilities.

Sophie Thomas:

What about on the domestic front? Could the pandemic change gender relations in the home?

Leah Ruppner:

My opinion on this is no. There will be an increased awareness of all the domestic work in the home because everyone is home together. The question will be as people are home together in the domestic sphere, I think it is important to understand what's happening within those dynamics in the home. So, are women still by default, picking up all of the unpaid childcare and housework and the mental work around it? Homeschooling their kids, figuring out when school's going to start, making sure your kids are reading as opposed to just sleeping and eating junk food like mine is. So are they doing that even if both partners are in the home? Are they still assuming the managerial role even when both of them are home around the domestic work and picking up that load regardless? I am going to bet, yes.

Leah Ruppanner:

Second is, that who is protecting whose time for work? So I saw a really interesting tweet online that said, "It's interesting because I'm sitting at the kitchen table while my husband sits in the office." That's an example of ways in which kind of one partner may be working to protect the other's workspace even when they're at home. Who is being interrupted throughout the day by the kids and who is not? And whose job is seen as more important for the family? And how does that lead to women, it's going to be more off men's, right? That this is kind of part of the power dynamic anyway, that's going to lead to women doing more of the work, maintaining boundaries to ensure that their husbands are productive.

Sophie Thomas:

It's incredibly interesting that the Australian government has decided now is the time to provide free childcare. What do you make of this dramatic policy shift?

Leah Ruppanner:

I say amen. Way to go. Congratulations. Yes. On some level it's a wonderful victory in that you finally are seeing the government acknowledging their work as essential and valuable and is willing to invest resource into it. My concern is that when the pandemic is over, that there will be a clawing back of this resource, that there will be an argument that this is no longer necessary or that there it needs to be cost saving, and the cost saving will be at the expense of women. So, I think it's a wonderful advance, however, I think it's very important to identify that childcare is essential.

Leah Ruppanner:

I think it is important to remember that childcare should be a public good, much in the way in which public school is or healthcare is, because it brings so much value, not only to the children in terms of their developmental process, equalizing access to high quality childcare is essential for closing the education gap that are class-based. But it's also essential for women to enter employment and maintain employment and it's also very good for the total family wellbeing, because childcare costs remain a major drain. It's great that the government has acknowledged that this is essential, it's too bad that it took the threat of actually having 30% of your nurses out of employment because all of a sudden no one can take care of children, but we need to maintain this because it's integral to a functioning healthy society.

Sophie Thomas:

If we fast forward five years' time and we're looking back on this crisis, do you think ultimately that it will have been good for gender equality or bad for gender equality?

Leah Ruppanner:

I think it all depends on what happens next. If in five years' time we fast forward and we look back and we've done nothing, we think that we can just go back to normal in the way in which we were before, then there will be no actual benefit to gender equality, and we will be in the place we were before if not worse off in five years. If we use this pandemic as a way to re-evaluate our values, policies, and our system, and we put caregiving and I mean caregiving broadly, caregiving kids, caregiving spouses, caregiving for friends, caregiving for family members, if we put that on equal parity as other things that we value ie market advances or technological advances, I think we will be more productive. I think we'll have a healthier society. We'll see better wellbeing. And I think the result of that will actually be less of a drain on the economic engine through the ways in which inequality actually makes us less productive.

Sophie Thomas:

So, how do we get to the other side of the pandemic without making gender inequity worse?

Leah Ruppanner:

I think that once we come out of the COVID pandemic, we are going to need to do a bit of repairing from the trauma that people experienced, not only those who are on the frontline doing all of the really intense healthcare work, there is going to be trauma there, but there also is going to be trauma or emotional damage for the parents that have been trying to balance work and children and relationships within the home. I think it's important always to acknowledge that for many the home is not a safe space, and asking families to come together intensely for long periods of time really puts a lot of people at risk, and so identifying, acknowledging, maintaining supports for people who are in situations of domestic violence. But I want you to also think about this on a continuum because I think there is going to be that extreme moment, but I think there also is going to be an increase in stress and strain even amongst those who have healthy, long-term stable relationships and good mental health. There is going to be a mental health penalty because of this.

Leah Ruppanner:

Now whether that opens up men's eyes to what women are doing, I think yes, but unless work changes, the minute they step back out of the home into employment, that the same demands on men's time in terms of expectations of long work hours being singularly devoted to their employer, working their way up the career ladder, not only because it's in their own self-interest, but also because costs of living are high. And so, if we do not have an institution like work that changes to allow men to have more flexible time, more working from home, then I think that the changes in the home will be minimal or erased from kind of this rate reveal of the COVID pandemic.

Sophie Thomas:

What if you're a manager or a business owner? What should you be considering at the moment?

Susan Ainsworth:

While there are some really immediate urgent crises that they face, in terms of lack of cashflow, in terms of having to close, I think to the extent that they can, to be compassionate with their staff and to think about how are we going to come out of this, and what position do we want to be in? In many cases, even if staff haven't lost their jobs, organizations are relying on a huge amount of goodwill from staff to keep operating. So how are they going to repay that? And how do they make people feel supported throughout this process? And how do they show that they recognize, it isn't just business as usual, and perhaps it's not reasonable to have the same expectations of productivity they would otherwise have?

Sophie Thomas:

So it's just about maintaining a level of compassion for your employees.

Susan Ainsworth:

It's about maintaining contact, so it's about being present. It's about trusting your employees, that they actually know what they're doing and they will do it. So I think one of the things that this might be challenging, is managers who have a very high need for control, and the paradox of control is you have to let it go to get it. So you actually have to trust people to do things and to have input to things in order to be able to influence how people behave. So I think this might be a test of a lot of managers and actually be something that is making them re-think, if not re-think, have to act differently, I'm wondering to what extent they'll reflect on that and learn from that and then carry

that learning through to whenever organizations re-open or go back to what might be some kind of normal. I don't think there will be a return to normal ever, and in some ways I hope there isn't.

Sophie Thomas:

What would you like to say to businesses at this time of crisis if their reflex is to cut diversity programs?

Susan Ainsworth:

I'd say, "Think about why you did it in the first place and what has changed? Are the reasons for doing it any different? And where do you want to be coming out of this?" So there will be an end to the current crisis, so businesses need to be thinking beyond the short term and really not falling into that hyper-reactivity of calling back anything that's not nailed down. When there were really good reasons why they might have embarked on these programs, and those good reasons will still exist in 6 or 9 or 12 months time. And if they haven't maintained their commitment to that, if they try and do anything in the future, it will be even harder. So I think this is a real test of the extent of business' commitment to diversity. To what extent are they going to see it as expendable? I think it should be a part of core business. I think it should be embedded and institutionalized so that when things like this happen, it can't be cut because it just becomes a normal way of operating.

Sophie Thomas:

Over the course of this crisis, the policy responses by governments have been hotly debated. Are there blind spots that need addressing as we recover from COVID-19?

Leah Ruppanner:

How can we support people in their recovery that is not just economically focused? This would be alleviating some of the caps on the mental health assistance that come through Medicare. This is not the time to have people soldiering through or muddling through this alone, that we need to allow people to get access to psychological and counselling support. As governments start to invest economically in the reopening of the economy, it is important to think not only about the kind of male dominated jobs that we often think are the economic engines of the economy, manufacturing and construction, but to also think about female dominated jobs that have been made very clear through this pandemic are also essential for the economy, like nurses, childcare workers, school teachers. But universally when they come into a new economic market, we are not going to have the same market we had before.

Leah Ruppanner:

It will exacerbate existing trends and changes that were already occurring, and we need to have ability for people to re-skill in ways that are going to be career lifting, that also has a childcare piece and a caregiving piece. Women are going to be integral to the future of the economy, but they can't get the skills they need if they don't have the time to step into these types of courses, classes or jobs. And that again, is about caregiving. So we need to really understand that underpinning the entire economy is this unpaid work done by women, and how do we actually allow that work to be identified as important and valuable in the ways it is, and support women with that work and men who are doing that work too, that allow our economy actually to function at its maximum capacity to reduce and mitigate the consequences of this pandemic?

Sophie Thomas:

We can't predict what the exact fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic is going to be, how it will ultimately affect our work and home lives moving forward. As we've heard, this crisis could make

things worse or we could revert back to the way things were. But if we're smart, it could be an opportunity to change things for the better.

Sophie Thomas:

Thank you to our guests, Associate Professors, Susan Ainsworth and Leah Ruppner, and a special shout out to Leah's daughter, Ava, for her guest appearance in the background. We'd like to take this chance to point you to the other episodes we've released in this series, exploring some of the ground we've covered today from parental leave, to unpaid work, to financial wellbeing, and female dominated work environments. Look for more *Women are the Business* on Spotify and Apple podcasts. Subscribe to the show for new episodes and 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. 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.