



More than 50 years since the Equal Pay decision in Australia – why do Australian women still not have pay equality?

Francis Leach ([00:00:00](#)):

You're listening to Absolutely Revolting. It's all about revolutions, rebel rousers, rat bags, and people who read lots of books. People who read lots of books. That's right. I'm talking about academics like my good friend Dr. Liam Byrne, who is my co-host on this port. Hello, Dr Liam Byrne, how are you?

Liam Byrne ([00:00:40](#)):

Hello Francis. I'm well. How are you going?

Francis Leach ([00:00:43](#)):

Yeah, not too bad at all. Today's an interesting discussion that we're gonna have about gender pay and the power of balance at work and working life. But before we do that, I want to acknowledge that we are on the lands of our traditional custodians. Of the lands of which we are recording are the wary people of the Kulin Nation. And as always, we pay our respects to elders past and present on this podcast. Now, gender pay gap is something that is talked a lot about and there is a sort of annual ritual now within the parliamentary system where the gender pay gap is actually measured in parliament. Each year in the federal parliament, the employment minister and the Minister for Women actually read out what the gender pay gap is in terms of whether it's closed any further than it had the previous year. So it's now part of our political lexicon, but for a long time it was just assumed that it was okay that men were paid more than women. Of course not by the long and storied history of those people who campaigned against it at a time when that was taboo too. And we, we pay our respects to those people. And that's a bit about what we're talking about today, isn't it? The long and tough and hard work that women in particular have done to get what's theirs, what's rightfully theirs, which is equal pay for an equal day's work.

Liam Byrne ([00:01:52](#)):

Yeah, that's right Francis. It is a very long inspiring struggle. It's one with many milestones and I think it's as an historian, what I wanna say is that it's one in which we've seen significant progress and milestones, which are really important, that victories that the feminists have fought for and won and certainly don't want to, uh, in any way diminish them. But of course to recognise as well that it is an ongoing struggle, as you said, that the gender pay gap does continue to exist in Australia, is still significant. And so it really is unfinished business. I suppose what we've seen was in Australian history was that up until the 1970s, the case that there was within the federal wage fixation system, separate rates of pay that were set for men and women and the pay rates were set basically on gendered assumptions about the value of work that men and women did and systemic undervaluation of the work that women did.

([00:02:41](#)):

Now, from 1969 to 1974, there were three really significant cases at the Industrial Tribunal, which was known as the Arbitration Commission. What they did was that they established a right to equal pay as a legal right, as something that was their proclaimed in principle. But what it didn't do was actually establish it as reality. And we've seen that since then. The unequal pay has continued to exist for a whole range of different reasons. One of them has been across entire industries, which are dominated by women workers continue to be undervalued precisely on that gendered basis. Those sexist ideas that have actually been inherited, I'd say from the colonial era and have persisted in different ways, they still remain. We've also seen particularly cultural expectations about women disproportionately taking on caring responsibilities and the role that plays within developing their careers, that that's actually limited the opportunities that many women have to advance their careers.

[\(00:03:30\):](#)

We've seen a phenomenon of what's referred to as the motherhood penalty where women, their earnings tend to drop by 55% in five years after having their first child. So all these different systemic factors have led to an ongoing pay gap, which the workplace Gender equality agency earlier this year estimated that if you look at total remuneration, so just the, the income from the wage, but also if you look at superannuation, if you look at bonuses and so on, women in 2025 earn 78 cents to every dollar earned by men still, which is quite an extraordinary thing when you think about it.

Francis Leach [\(00:04:02\):](#)

So it's still a hell of a lot of work to do to make sure that the gap is closed. So today though, we're gonna be talking about those people who have been fighting and those that went before them, that fought the battle long and hard prior to there being any sort of structural effort to address the pay gap and even to get it to that point, I mean there's a famous statue, isn't there, Liam? Outside Trades Hall in Melbourne. It was recently commissioned. It's one of my favourite bits of sort of a prop art, if we call it that, of Zelda. Tell people about Zelda and who Zelda was and the work that she did and her symbolic and fierce protest to try to address this issue.

Liam Byrne [\(00:04:38\):](#)

Yeah, so that statue is of somebody called Zelda Deano, and she is a, a really inspiring individual and and character. I think you could say she was born in 1928 in Carlton in Melbourne, very much at that time, a bit different today, very much a working class suburb at that point. And she was somebody who from the very beginning of her working life encountered sexism and was somebody who was very, very willing to stand up against it. So quite often in her early career, she went from factory job to factory job because quite consistently when horrible things were being done within the workplace, she would be very prepared to call it out. And funnily enough, a lot of her employers weren't so keen on that. So the cost of her sticking up for herself basically in that period because of a lack of protections for many women workers was being dismissed.

[\(00:05:23\):](#)

Now in 1969, she began working with the Meat Workers Union, the A-M-I-E-U and the A-M-I-E-U was one of the unions that took a case for equal pay in 1969 to the arbitration commission. One of the cases I mentioned before, now this is one of actually the last cases just out of historical interest that Bob Hawke was the union advocate. So he used to be the person who put the cases and was one of the last cases that he put on behalf of the union movement. But Zelda went to the, um, the tribunal hearing and basically she described actually how demeaning it was that women workers had to sit there and listen as male advocates debated the value of the work that they did. That case ended in 1969 with a ruling in favour of equal pay for equal work that only really applied to women and men who did the exact same type of work, um, side by side in a particular workplace or industry.

[\(00:06:11\):](#)

What it didn't do was address that systemic undervaluation of work that women did in other industries that was comparable worth, uh, to the work that men were doing, but that that was undervalued. And so Zelda decided that she wanted to make sure that remained in the public attention, that it wasn't something where people would say, oh, well that case has happened. We don't have to worry about that anymore, equal pay sorted. She wanted to make it clear that actually the issue remained. So what she did was that she took a leaf outta the book of the suffragettes, the women who campaigned for a right to vote earlier in the century in both Britain and Australia. And she chained herself. She got a chain actually donated to her by a union and she chained herself to the, the front doors of what was known as the Commonwealth Building here in Melbourne, where a number of the commonwealth public servants worked, where some of the big offices were.

[\(00:06:53\)](#):

And it caused a real stink and a bit of a tension about, well, why is this person doing this? Which gave her the opportunity to say no equal pay hasn't been resolved. 10 days later, she did the same thing again, but with two other women who were both members of the teacher's union as forerunner of the Australian Education Union today. And they did the same thing at the front door of the arbitration commission, which was that industrial tribunal I mentioned before. And so it was a real attempt to sort of assert themselves on the campaign and to make the point equal pay is not a reality yet and we are gonna keep campaigning until it is, which is a pretty extraordinary action and quite an inspiring one.

Francis Leach [\(00:07:25\)](#):

It's indeed and the Statue of Zelda is one, if you're in the area, she'd go and say hello to her. She'd done great work. But there are plenty of others that did that sort of work with her alongside her in that campaign for years before and after. And we're gonna talk about that today. And who are we gonna talk about that with Liam?

Liam Byrne [\(00:07:40\)](#):

Well, we've got some incredible guests today, some, uh, leading scholars of the history of sexism in the world of work and also scholars about the industrial realities of the labour market and women's workplace experiences today. So firstly, we've got Professor Marilyn Lake who quite literally wrote the book on feminism in Australia, an incredible historian. And then later we've got Leah Riper and Lisa Heap who are both gonna join us who are experts in gender inequality in modern workplaces.

Francis Leach [\(00:08:12\)](#):

The podcast is absolutely revolting. Francis Leach and Dr. Liam Burn with you. We're talking about the history of gendered pay and gendered work and the massive yawning gap that remains Dr. Liam between men and women when it comes to equal work, equal pay, equal opportunity to earn equal work and equal pay. It's a complex matter that needs to be resolved and we are doing our best to understand how and why and we're joined by Professor Marilyn Lake who's historian and author of *Getting Equal* and you need to make a, uh, a disclosure about your relationship. Well, professor

Liam Byrne [\(00:08:43\)](#):

Marilyn Lake, I used to have the great opportunity to work for Marilyn. She's one of the big intellectual influences on me as she has been on so many historians of Australia in Australia and also transnational movements. So I'm very excited that Marilyn's here. It's a huge honour. So thank you so much Marilyn.

Marilyn Lake [\(00:08:56\)](#):

Thanks for coming in. Terrific. Glad to be here.

Francis Leach (00:08:59):

Okay. Give us a, a basic understanding at the very start. Can you explain how gender roles has shaped early Australian nation at Federation? And maybe before

Marilyn Lake (00:09:07):

We might begin by thinking about the late 19th century. Yeah. In the lead up to Federation. So there was a really strong woman suffrage movement, feminist movement that was then called the Woman Movement in the singular. And one of their obsessions emphasis a focus was on the independence of women. That was one of their goals in the 1880s, 1890s, figures like Rose Scott who was a leader of the suffrage movement in New South Wales was really important in this. And it's important to emphasise this, the independence of women, because today we tend to think about women's position in the workforce or in terms of equal pay in terms of equality. But it's really interesting and for historians we always have to ask why and try and explain things. It's really interesting that for many decades the focus was on securing the independence of women, particularly the economic independence of women.

(00:10:06):

And it tells us a lot, I think. And when I was recently rereading my chapter and getting equal about, there's a whole chapter on the independence of women. I was quite struck again by the radical nature of the analysis of these women from the 1890s through the 1920s, really right up to the depression when something happens that is that they understood very clearly that whether women were inside marriage or outside marriage, they were basically sex slaves in the sense that they were forced into dependence on men, whether that be their husbands or not. And if they didn't have a sort of economic dependence on men, they were often forced into prostitution. And that was another of the big focuses of the woman movement was how to, you know, rescue women from prostitution. And then once they became citizens with full, equal political rights in 1902, they were then very clear sighted about the way that the wife, the figure of the wife was an anomaly. You know, like how could you be a citizen wife? It seemed to be a contradiction in terms because citizenship promised individuality and individual status. And being a wife, the very definition was that you were dependent on a man

Francis Leach (00:11:26):

And subservient to

Marilyn Lake (00:11:27):

And subservient to. And indeed men had conjugal rights. This is another key fact. We should think about the position of men, of course in relation to women. And right up until the 1980s, men still had conjugal rights in law.

Francis Leach (00:11:43):

So those inequalities were structurally built in to the way that we organised our society and in the law itself.

Marilyn Lake (00:11:49):

Absolutely. Again, I was quite struck by one of the insights of feminists in the 1920s and 1930s. They had a quite keen understanding of history and of the the long duree, the history of the Industrial Revolution. Jesse Street for example, who was a leading feminist in New South Wales, she used to always explain to people that before the industrial revolution, when production manufacture, whatever the economy took place at home, in a sense, you know, that there wasn't this strict division of labour, but with the industrial revolution, when men went out to work and increasingly

there was a division between home and work and women were re relegated to the home and to economic independence, she said she saw this as relatively recent in terms of the long economic history of men and women, which I think is again interesting. You know, they saw this, nothing natural about this, but this had occurred with the moving of production and manufacture outside the home.

Liam Byrne ([00:12:43](#)):

Obviously this is an era, it's talking about industrial capitalism where these sort of processes are taking place economically. But this is also an era in the late 19th, early 20th century where Australia's very much conditioned by its relationship to the British Empire, to an imperial context. What's the relationship between empire and ideas of empire and these gendered roles

Marilyn Lake ([00:13:01](#)):

In terms of gendered roles? And of course it's also the lead up to federation. I mean, this is a quite crucial context because people are really excited in thinking about what the new nation state will be. Again, I've been struck and in recent work I've been doing by how idealists the people who founded the Commonwealth of Australia were in the late 80 nineties in the early 20th century. I mean they were very excited and very idealistic about this new commonwealth with a significant term, you know, collective distribution of for the common good. They were very excited about the new nation state that they were actually creating. Now, white women secured four political rights in 1902, and so many people wrote about the fact that this was pretty rare in the history of the world for a new nation state to be created at virtually the same time as women secured for political rights.

([00:13:58](#)):

So women were very, feminists, were very conscious about what their role would be. I mean, on the one hand there continued to be strong relationships with imperial folk and in London, but on the other hand, it was very much a self-conscious new world in which men and women would have new world opportunities. Now, women's opportunities were focused on the fact that they were citizens, but they were also mothers and wives, and particularly as mothers, they thought that doing the work of motherhood was really important and therefore mothers should have rights. And there was a new discourse about rights. Citizens had rights, mothers should have rights, workers should have rights, and mothers should have rights. And one of those rights was the right to economic independence.

Francis Leach ([00:14:48](#)):

There was a time also as the federation was established of new ways of dealing with labour and dealing with disputes. So the arbitration courts, the ability to set the minimum wage and those sorts of things are really quite progressive and cutting edge changes that uh, led the world in a lot of ways. But did that make a difference to women?

Marilyn Lake ([00:15:06](#)):

Yes, indeed. They did leave the world in many ways. And my last book called Progressive New World was exactly about the fact that people came from far and wide over the ocean to see all of these new social economic experiments in place. I mean, so many progressive Americans came, and British and French and Germans, people often don't know enough about that, about these new economic and social experiments. Now, in terms of women, on the one hand, they were very self-conscious that they led the world. They were in the vanguard in having political rights except for New Zealand where women had secured the right to vote but not stand for parliament. Australian women, white women were the first in the world to have full political rights. So this was part of being part of the new world. And people in the United States, progressives there often wrote things like in Australia,

Australia is ruled by the working man and the voting woman, this is sort a nice duo in their mind that these two figures who has secured new important political rights.

(00:16:08):

So women, they already had political rights and so they argued for the economic independence of women. And as part of that, they said, married women must have economic rights. They must secure the individuality. And so they began to formulate a new programme, and particularly women in the trade union movement, in the labour movement in the 1920s. They were very fierce because they came under attack from labour men because there was a big nationwide argument about the wage system because the wage system as instituted by HB Higgins for example, the wage system was predicated on the idea that men had to support women and children and so therefore get to get paid more, that their human rights included the right to support wives and children. But women feminists, including the labour movement increasingly saw that this was a bit of a hoax because there were all these men getting a higher wage on false pretences because so many men didn't have any dependents at all, didn't have any children at all.

(00:17:13):

And yet they were getting this higher wage as Jesse Street said, she must have really annoyed them because she was the sort of middle class feminist. As she said, many, many thousands of men were getting this higher wage on false pretences. So what an alliance of middle class feminists like Jesse Street and labour feminists like Miro Heney, Jean Daley and Ne Ricky in the 1920s at trades hall council, they came together to argue for the sort of disassembly really of the basis of wages. And they said that wages should be paid on an individual basis, the rate for the job, as they often said. And they used the phrase, the WA rate for the job because they meant and not for the sex, it should be a rate for the job. And once the rate for the job was established, then people, workers would be paid on an individual basis. And then that meant the state would have to take care of the economic support of both mothers doing their important work as mothers and quite separately child endowment because children needed support. Obviously

Liam Byrne (00:18:16):

It's such an incredible period of time and I think it may be a bit difficult for, you know, here in 2025 to kind of capture really what the mindset of this new federation was. Thinking about this sort of concepts about citizenship and you sort of mentioned the gendered realities of it. I mean, who was in and who was out when it comes to citizenship? Like what were the exclusions that were operating on that basis? As you mentioned, there's kinda like this natural tension between the citizen and the wife in terms of the way rights were distributed. What were some of the other tensions and exclusions? Indeed,

Marilyn Lake (00:18:41):

And as you say, it was a really exciting period for them and for us as historians to look back on because they were creating this new nation, this new nation state. So on the one hand, it was a very progressive new world, a very progressive nation state with this series of rights, particularly for the working man and the voting woman. On the other hand, the focus of people like Higgins of many labour reformers, of many progressives, of many progressive intellectuals was to secure a high standard of living. And they define that high standard of living in terms of a white man's standard of living. The white man was securing his dignity and his status rescuing him from the degradation that could come with wage labour. That was their focus. Now that of course had all sorts of implications if the white man was at the centre of their efforts.

(00:19:38):

So it was problematic for women obviously, and it was also problematic for those men who weren't white men. And so as we know, part of the deal of federation in 1901 was to work out who was in

and who was out. And because the focus was on securing the status of the white man and securing the white man's standard of glueing , which was meant to be very high, that rested on an understanding of non-white labour as cheap labour and particularly as Cooley labour. They invoked what the great American Chinese American historian may I has called the ideology of COism, which of course was at work in the United States as well. They invoked that ideology. They also though referred again and again and we can't forget this was still pretty recent to them, slavery was still a fairly recent idea. It was still in existence in the 19th century in the British Empire.

(00:20:41):

And in fact the British Empire really was marked by slavery and then following slavery, indentured labour. And many, many people saw indentured labour, for example, in the Caribbean or Indians in Fiji as just an extension of slavery in other terms. And the indentured labour of Indians in Fiji was still in existence at the time of federation. This was a contemporary thing. And of course the indentured labour of Pacific Islanders was just a recent memory. Again, one of the reforms of 1901 was to deport Pacific Islanders from Australia precisely because they were degraded indentured labour and there was no room for that in Australia. So they had to be deported. And it was a sort of terrible business where they would just put on boats and set to, you know, whatever islands in the Pacific. So this whole experiment was predicated on having an experiment in which you did everything to secure the status of the white working man. So that meant indeed that there were some who are more privileged than others, some who are in and some who are out.

Liam Byrne (00:21:48):

So Marilyn, you spoke there about Henry Bourne's Higgins. Yeah, HB Higgins. And this is a figure who really was defining in Australian history, but I think probably isn't in too many history textbooks these days doesn't have a Netflix series and so on. But Higgins was very, very significant and particularly one decision he made as president of the arbitration court in 9 0 7 was particularly significant. Can you tell us a little bit about that and its gender dynamics,

Marilyn Lake (00:22:09):

I mean that's shocking that Higgins doesn't have a Netflix series.

Liam Byrne (00:22:12):

I'm writing it

Francis Leach (00:22:13):

As we speak. Don't worry,

Marilyn Lake (00:22:14):

<laugh>, because he's indeed a great figure in Australian history. He's an intellectual radical, a progressive, and he was fated around the world because of the innovative nature of his thinking and his practise. And he was one of those few radical intellectuals who were able to put their ideas into practise. First of all, he was in the Victorian legislative assembly when Victoria was still a colony. So he was one of the key figures supporting the first minimum wage in the world, which happened in 1896 in the colony of Victoria. Now, we don't know much about that at all in our history books, even in Australia because we tend to think of national history as federal history. But this happened in the colony of Victoria in 1896, but in the United States leading progressives poured over this legislation and read all the factory reports about how it was operating.

(00:23:07):

And Walter Lipman, for example, said this act in 1896 that set up the first legal compulsory minimum wage in the world, and alongside that wages boards with workers employers equally represented. I

mean they were amazed. And Walter Lipman called this the advent of economic democracy because this would allow working men to secure their status through their own self-help, as it were. They could sit on wages boards. Now Higgins and Deacon, a fellow radical liberal, was also in the Victorian legislative assembly. Now they both moved into the federal Parliament in 1901 and they were two of the key figures who designed the New Nation state. One of their pieces of legislation were old age and lin of pensions, I mean paid from general revenue. And that too was quite revolutionary.

Liam Byrne ([00:23:58](#)):

Was that the first time in the world or was that,

Marilyn Lake ([00:24:00](#)):

I don't think it was actually the first time in the world, but what was really significant about all these reforms, which they often pointed out, was that they were all paid out of general revenue, whereas Europe and Britain were experimenting with workers' insurance as we would later know it, as with superannuation that you paid in before you got out. I mean this was was the sort of insurance, social insurance they had in Britain and Germany, Australia was really proud of the fact that it was redistributive, you know, that everybody paid taxes and then from general revenue as still now with unemployment benefits and as happened with the maternity benefit, this all came from general revenue. That was a really, really significant reform. And

Francis Leach ([00:24:38](#)):

The key thing of that was your wage level or how much you were earning didn't determine how much you were entitled to

Marilyn Lake ([00:24:44](#)):

Exactly. I mean it was a really progressive thing that it was redistributive, it was, you know, sort of an aspect of the commonwealth of Australia. And that's absolutely right because as we all know, one of the problems with superannuation today is that what you get depends a lot on your wage level and whether you're a man and woman and all those sorts of things,

Liam Byrne ([00:25:01](#)):

Which is one of the reasons why the gender pay gap also is perpetuated in superannuation.

Marilyn Lake ([00:25:05](#)):

Yeah, oh, absolutely. It completely reflects, you know, the sort of 1980s, 1990s that what's going on in waste levels. I know, I mean often think about that and how, you know, they were so progressive back then when they decided these things should come from general revenue.

Francis Leach ([00:25:21](#)):

It's quite a radical thing to do.

Marilyn Lake ([00:25:22](#)):

Yes, no, absolutely. I mean this is, I mean many of the things were quite radical and they thought them through, you know, there was a lot of thinking behind this. So Higgins, who was one of the big thinkers, and in fact in 1911, as I said, a lot of people came to Australia to witness these experiments. In 1911, a professor came from the University of Ohio, Hammond MB Hammond, and he chose to take a year's sabbatical, leave his university sabbatical, leave in Australia and see that, you know, to look at what was happening and to sort of get to know Higgins and to interview him. And then he wrote lots of articles when he went back about this and in those articles he said

something like, um, HB Higgins, he's the leading fit in the world of social democracy. He has thought more and written more about the basis of these decisions than anyone else.

(00:26:10):

I mean, Higgins was really claimed as a sort of celebrity, but just to get quickly under the harvester judgement is that Higgins required in that decision. He was already president of the arbitration consideration and arbitration court. He was required in a decision to, to define what were fair levels of wages. And he said a fair level of wages must be a living wage. It must be a la, a wage that can support a human being living in a civilised society. This is where you come back to cool again, it was a human being with human needs and human rights in a civilised society can support them, you know, in decent comfort. And he famously elaborated lots of things that workers as human beings had a right to, I mean not just sort of food and groceries and rents and all of that stuff, but also in intoxicating liquors and church Jews and insurance and newspapers and, and so that harvested judgement that although in law it was actually rendered illegitimate because the act on which it was based was thought to be unconstitutional. Nevertheless, it served as a really strong moral precedent and very influential in our thinking about what wages should be based on because the alternative were things like productivity or the level of profits of employers or custom or as Higgins put it, higgins in the market. There are all sorts of different ways as we know today, uh, different reasons for wage levels, but Higgins was clear that if a business could not pay their employees a living wage, that he said they had no right to do business in Australia.

Francis Leach (00:27:52):

Was that the first time the concept of a living wage was articulated in that way?

Marilyn Lake (00:27:56):

Yeah, it's very interesting, isn't it, the idea of the living wage because in 1896 there was the, uh, world first minimum wage to which he was witness a supporter directly there. What he did in 1907 was to define that compulsory minimum wage as a living wage. What happened was, as historians in the United States have written, they all agree that Australia invented the idea of the living wage. That this, this was an Australian invention and which is another reason they all came to look at it and stuff, the living wage became, you know, a top standard to aim for. And there was another labour woman, Alice Henry and I'm again from Melbourne, but she went to work in the United States in the National Women's Trade Union League in Chicago and she edited their journal called Life and Labour. And there's a really famous passage when she explains to her American readers what the living wage is. And she too elaborates on this is great sort of definition about how they'll have clothes that are elegant and beautiful and you know, and it's a sort of really lyrical evocation of how workers should be able to live.

Liam Byrne (00:29:04):

And it breezes the really interesting gendered question again, when we talk about who's in and who's out, we talk, this is pioneering idea of harvester about a basic wage, minimum wage, which you know, does have those precincts but is a really stunning declaration that the market alone should determine something else should. But what are the gendered assumptions which were embedded in that decision? What were their implications?

Marilyn Lake (00:29:22):

Indeed, and this is crucial and we must come back to the economic independence of women because on the one hand this was a radical innovation. The idea that workers were human beings, we should be treated as human beings, not slaves, not as coolies. And so they had rights and a right to a decent standard of living. On the other hand, the definition of the worker as a human and therefore the definition of the human as male began to have troubling implications and particularly

to all the women trade union workers and organisers in Melbourne. There was a meeting in 1913 of women trade union organisers where they looked particularly at this and there'd been another, another judgement that Higgins had made the rural workers case in 1912 where he explicitly said that if a job is a man's job then it should be paid for men the men's standard.

(00:30:17):

But if women are primarily doing that job, he said famously then there'll be a different standard. And he set that at about 54% of the male standard. He explicitly set that out in the rural workers case in 1912. So once he'd done that, you know, women were course really alarmed and they met in lots of meetings and conventions and stuff and pressed for the fact that women workers should also get a wage sufficient to keep them in comfort that they too had a right to a living wage. There was a sort of problem then, you know, because on the one hand, if men's rights included the right to keep children and to support their wives to do all the housework, you know, what would you do about women? So this, this was fought out 1910s, 1920s as I say, when all those women trade unions became active and the solution they came up with was to say, okay, wages should not be set on the basis of social responsibilities.

(00:31:12):

They have to be for individuals, the rate for the job, and then we need the state to step in and pay an income to mothers to support them in their work of mothering and then also child endowment for kids. And I wanna just read to you an exchange that occurred at the Royal Commission in 1927. A Royal commission was called to nut this out. You know, there there were just so many anomalies in what to do and there were so many contradictions. So the feminists all went to the Royal Commission and they put the idea that women as mothers should be paid in separate independent income from the state to enable them to have economic independence from the men while they were doing the important and time consuming work of mothering. By the way, one of the things that also interests me about this is that recognition which we now sometimes don't have, that the work of mothering, you know, housework, all of that stuff was real work and it's really time consuming.

(00:32:12):

I speak as someone who's a mother and still women to this day, young women still find this impossible. Anyway, they went to the Royal Commission and they put to the commissioners the idea that the state therefore should pay motherhood endowment for the time being when they did the work of mothering to give them an economic income. And the royal commissions are astonished by this suggestion. And one of them says to um, Irene Longman who's from Queensland, and it's very interesting the terms he uses. He says, your theory, he says is that the state should pay the wife for services rented to the state. And she says, yes, we say that her services to the state are as great as those of the man and therefore that those services should be paid for as an independent economic unit. The Royal Commissioner then says in more, even more astonishments, women could live apart from their husband <laugh>, that is an alteration of existing conditions. And she replies, yes, absolutely it is revolutionary and that is what we wish.

Francis Leach (00:33:22):

But isn't that the point of the way the structure of the wage structures existed was to limit the opportunity of women having the choice to make and then in fact it locked them in to a choice of either marriage or poverty. And given that a lot of women would've chosen a unhappy marriage over the poverty that was on offer on the other side, if they chose to step outside of the economic security of marriage because that equal wage and equal opportunities didn't exist economically for them. I

Marilyn Lake (00:33:49):

Mean absolutely. And that's one of the things Muriel Hiney always says that many many women were making bad marriages, foolish marriages, because that was their only respectable means of support unless they went into prostitution. I mean they always saw the prostitute and the wife as two sides of the coin despite, or because of their, the revolutionary nature of their demands. And the term revolution was used a lot. Of course, they didn't win what they wanted. And then in the 1930s the depression came and then that led to because of you know, huge unemployment amongst men, quite explicit, concerted attacks on women's right to work. There was so many attacks on women working in paid work and saying they were taking men's jobs. So there was a massive mobilisation on the part of women trade unions, including again, Muriel Hiney who wrote a famous book called *Are Women Taking Men's Jobs* Question mark published in 1935 in and *Fantastic Source* by the way, you know, of patterns of employment and industry.

(00:34:52):

And one of the things she basically argues that as today men and women did different kinds of work, you know, so that no women weren't taking men's jobs because they worked as nurses or whatever and not engineers, but there was a massive campaign for women, women's right to work. And this had never had to be waged before because there actually hadn't been, as it were, ideological barriers. And for example, in 1932, I don't know whether you remember that women teachers and lecturers, university lecturers were sacked if they were married. There was massive sacking of married women all over the place. So suddenly mobilised feminist trade union women's focus was on women's right to work and there was a lot of articulation of the right to work how women just like men have a right to work and then you get the council of action for equal pay. There's a big departure created in 1937.

Francis Leach (00:35:45):

We've gotta wind it up. There's so much we could talk about. But I wanna ask you this, if Muriel Hiney was here today and looking at the current structure of the way our wage system works and what opportunities there are for women, but what barriers to equality and economic independence still remain, what do you think she'd make of our attempts to, to change the system that she used to have to fight against?

Marilyn Lake (00:36:04):

Well I think like most of us, she would see gains and setbacks. You know, it's a complicated thing as Germaine Greer once said, she said 20, 30 years ago, but it's still the case. She said women's lives are better but harder now. And Muriel Hiney had once said, working mothers she said, are the hardest working women in Australia. And she meant working mothers in both senses. And I think that is still the case. And I think in some ways it's more entrenched, you know that division whereby women do the majority of unpaid childcare and unpaid housework still and that feeds into the inequalities of superannuation system. And it means not only do women earn less than men in average full-time terms, but their lesser pay rates are exacerbated by the fact that many more women than men work in part-time work. For that very reason. Many more women don't have the mobility of men for that very reason. Many more women work in care industries. So she would see a lot that she was familiar with,

Francis Leach (00:37:10):

Which is a shame, that's for sure. We've got a lot of work to do. Look, it's been great having you here Professor. Thank you for coming on our little podcast.

Marilyn Lake (00:37:17):

A pleasure, a good talk.

Francis Leach ([00:37:18](#)):

Professor Marion Lake, dear historian and author of the book *Getting Equal* with us here on Absolutely revolting

Liam Byrne ([00:37:33](#)):

And welcome back to Absolutely Revolting, your regular dose of revolutionary rebellious and rebel rousing contents. Francis who is usually doing the introductions for very good reason is unfortunately having to step out for a little bit of time, but he's passed reigns over to me so chaos shall reign. Very luckily, I'm joined by two experts to continue our discussion about gender undervaluation and sexism at work. We're talking about more than five decades on since the last of the free major equal pay cases of the 1960s and 1970s. Why is there still a gender pay gap and why is there still sexism and inequality at work? I'm joined by two fantastic experts, professor Leah Wana who is joining us from, well her own podcast I should say. So I'm a little bit intimidated by the incredible expertise that she's bringing today, but who is a professor of sociology and a founding director at the future of Work Lab and the gender equity initiative at the University of Melbourne and with a book called *Drained*, which offers a new way to understand the mental load, which is forthcoming next year. Leah, thank you very much for joining us.

Leah Ruppanner ([00:38:35](#)):

Thank you for having me.

Liam Byrne ([00:38:37](#)):

And listeners may not have heard about your podcast yet, can you just let us know a little bit about it?

Leah Ruppanner ([00:38:40](#)):

So I started a podcast called *Misperceived* and the whole purpose of this podcast is to help you understand all the things that we say about women, about gender with evidence. Is it actually true that women can multitask? Is it actually true that if you do more cooking and cleaning you have less sex? Why are we having fewer babies should everyone breastfeed? These are all the types of things that we talk about day to day and we trade with each other. And I'm here to give you some evidence, the research to back up some of these claims that we trade. And sometimes these contribute to the gender pay gap, right? This all feeds into the same system.

Liam Byrne ([00:39:18](#)):

And I'm also joined by Dr. Lisa Heap, who is a labour lawyer and researcher with a research focus on gender and inequalities at work, work health and safety, and the regulation of work. Lisa holds degrees in political science and industrial relations law and applied human rights. She's advised several New Zealand and Australian unions and appeared in pay equity cases before tribunals in both countries as well as being a good friend of mine. Lisa, how are you?

Lisa Heap ([00:39:41](#)):

Hi Liam, thank you so much and thank you Leah for being here. I'm really excited to hear what you've got to say. Uh,

Liam Byrne ([00:39:47](#)):

Al and Lisa, when talk about in introduction peering for unions in New Zealand and Australia for tribunals, what are we talking about there? What are some of those examples and experiences?

Lisa Heap ([00:39:55](#)):

The one that I'm most known for, although I'm not very well known, so there you go, is um, in 2009 I ran the case for the Queensland Services Union to argue that the rates of pay for social community services workers were undervalued and that that undervaluation was predominantly about the way that work was seen as basically an extension of women's work in the home and or something that came out of charitable purposes and therefore wasn't something that was a significant to the labour market or should be valued highly in the labour market. And so that was the first case in the for social and community services workers and that set wage increases of between 19 and 45% for those workers. That wage increase flowed on then to a case in the federal jurisdiction, which took those rates of pay and made them available for all of the workers in the social and community service industry across the country.

([00:40:48](#)):

So that's the one I'm historically most uh, known for. But then in more recent times I've been advising New Zealand unions and one of the ones I peered for the New Zealand Public Service Association and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation in their case for nursing work to get a gender pay increase. And again, very similar in terms of the gender pay gap. So again, up to 45% wage increases for nurses in New Zealand, which came at a very important time just before the change of government there and just before the legislation has now been changed will mean it much harder for workers in New Zealand to get that wage increase unfortunately.

Liam Byrne ([00:41:28](#)):

Yeah. Well what an incredible store of knowledge and experience that we have with both guests today. Earlier in this podcast we were talking to Professor Marilyn Lake about some of the history of gendered assumptions at work and the way that this is uh, you know, informed and shaped the experience that women workers have. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about today and what some of the dominant gendered assumptions are around the workplace for women and the way that shapes women's experiences at work and their career journeys. Leo, perhaps we begin with you.

Leah Ruppanner ([00:41:55](#)):

It's an interesting question 'cause I think one of the challenges for women is that the workplace expectations are for everyone. And so they're often set based on this kind of ideal, what we call in the literature that I read, which you read maybe different things or the same things or we're speaking in the same conversations. But there's this idea that there's this ideal worker and the ideal worker is someone who is totally committed to the workplace, who's uninterrupted, who can be available at all moments in time and who is a hundred percent devoted to the workplace. The challenge for many people and many workers is that they have competing devotions. They, this comes from Mary Blair, Lloyd's idea of like competing devotions. That you don't just have a life that is work, but you have a life that is work plus family, plus life, plus everything else that's going on plus yourself.

([00:42:41](#)):

And if you think about these things, they're both greedy. There's this kind of argument that work is very greedy and what's more and more and more and more time. And unfortunately family can be quite greedy. We often think about family as being loving and embracing and warm and it can be those things, but it also can be incredibly time demanding. It can be intense, it can ask a lot of you in terms of a commitment. And so one of the challenges is what our workplaces ask us to do is to be only devoted to work. We saw during COVID that this fell apart, like this idea of we need to be this perfect worker, we need to show up pretending like nothing in our life is happening, fell apart. But the question is what happens now? Is the ideal worker norm dead? I don't think so.

(00:43:25):

But is it shifting probably a little bit. Is it enough? Not really. And the challenge is what we're asking women to do is be like men in that they're supposed to show up as the ideal worker, have no commitments, nothing outside of work. But the unfortunate thing is we're asking men to conform to those ideals too. It's not just bad for women, it's bad for men too who wanna be more engaged in family who also will have caregiving demands come, doesn't have to be kids, it can be an ageing spouse, it can be a, a parent who's unwell. I mean this assumption that we are autonomous actors at work is so flawed, but it's bad for men and women.

Liam Byrne (00:44:01):

Yeah. Lisa, is that what you've seen in your research in your industrial work?

Lisa Heap (00:44:05):

Yes, I agree exactly with what you're saying about this idea that work has been constructed around the concept of the ideal worker and around that idea that they're always available, but also that what we value as work has been constructed around what men have traditionally done versus what women have traditionally done. And so for me it's like looking at things like what Joan Aker would refer to as gender regimes at work. So you know, where how what work has done, done, what work has valued the, all of the assumptions that go into what's important and what's not are part of this kind of problem. And for me, in the areas I've concentrated on, it's really been about, well hang on a minute here. Australia has a very gender segregated labour market, um, higher than most other OECD countries. I think people in Australia don't necessarily recognise that, that we are really, it's this is not the norm everywhere else.

(00:44:56):

So we have both a highly gender segregated labour market. We also have the highest rate of part-time work in the OECD, which means that what we've got is women working in segregated industries and unfortunately those industries and the work in those industries is not valued as much as men. And we've got also women who are, because they're balancing inside of work and outside of work responsibilities and doing more of that responsibility, caring, responsibility at home and in the community that they're having to work part-time even though they might want to work longer hours in order to balance those responsibilities. So it's kind of a double impact for women. You know, even if you are not working in a female dominated industries, you're more likely as a woman to be in the lower levels of the structure in those areas of work. You're more likely to be casual or on contract or some form of insecure arrangement around work.

(00:45:53):

We've built these structures that rely on kind of women being treated as an incidental or an addition to the labour market. So the expectation is that men will be there as the primary breadwinner and that women, if they do engage with the paid labour market, that they'll be kind of incidental or peripheral is often the term that's referred to. And so it doesn't matter so much that they might not be paid as much, it doesn't matter so much that they might be in insecure work arrangements because the expectation is that they're only adding to the household income. And of course that's a fallacy that started right from the beginning of the harvester judgement, that the idea that there was a male breadwinner, uh, right back then ignored the fact that there were female heads of households even in 1907. And it's not true now either that um, you know, we've got dual income households and we've got the requirement for dual income households and we've got the need for that in our society, but we still got structures that are based on that idea of that one male bread leader. And if women are in paid work, it's kind of peripheral and supplementary. It's not kind of of their own right, important or needed.

Liam Byrne (00:47:01):

So it seems like we have these ideas and assumptions which are very much drawn from that previous society and economy not really suited necessarily to 2025 and, and the, the modern economy. And yet those ideas and assumptions still seem to be shaping women's work experience to such an extraordinary extent and leading to these inequalities. What explains that? Like how do we understand why these assumptions are endured in this way?

Lisa Heap (00:47:22):

Neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy. <laugh>. There you go. Two, two is that two or three words I think don't think, think we can get around the fact that capital does benefit from these structures. They do benefit from people there being a peripheral workforce from them not having to pay as much for the work that women do. So that's something and reinforcing those patriarchal and gender structures at work is beneficial to capital in terms of the point of view of the more you can keep a peripheral insecure workforce, pay them less, the more you've got flexibility in how you, you know, move in and out of the labour market in terms of the capital's need for labour, you know, they're pretty persistent power structures that are gonna work against women being treated equally at work and women making it easy for women to get secure ongoing well-paid work.

Liam Byrne (00:48:17):

Leah, is that what you've seen in your research or,

Leah Ruppanner (00:48:19):

I agree. I'm trying to think about like the other piece on this, which is I think there is a lot of change. I think we expect different things from workplaces and I think there's a shift, right? Like I sometimes when I have these conversations, yeah, it's difficult because I think men really actually are trying to be active and trying to be active caregivers and trying to step into the workforce in a different way. And we have a research project that showed the challenges then what, how does the institution respond to you as an individual, right? Like you may try to enact different ways of being a worker and a dad or a husband or a caregiver or a son. And then what does that look like when you come back into the workplace and you try to execute your kind of values and ideals and expectations in that location?

(00:49:03):

We have a bunch of research on the mental load and we're hearing this from all the fathers they're talking about. It's very difficult. There's a mental load to this, to how do you think about how do you be a good human and a good parent and different to previous generations and then how do you make sure you're bringing in enough money? You're kind of in these competing pressures, right? This tension point of I wanna do better but I can't because there's this parallel expectation of me to bring in enough money. And it's hard when you need two incomes as Lisa raised, right? Like this idea that we're a breadwinner society is a lie. You're not the US isn't the UK isn't, you're a dual earner society and have been for a very long time since 1970 on right? Women's income is not peripheral as the norms dictate.

(00:49:46):

It's actually central and it's one of the key reasons people have remained in the middle class because women have worked, women have more education now they're getting more returns to income. So I think there's this question about what do you do as an individual where you, you can feel that it's different but you have this little tension points. So sometimes this discrimination patriarchy comes, neoliberal ideas come in ways that are subtle, right? Right. Like you're living your life and you're making your decisions and you're not there thinking, oh man, I'm up against like the power structures. You're there. Like this is fucking hard and I wanna be there for my kids and I wanna make

enough money and my partner's unhappy and, and how am I gonna reconcile this and who's gonna do what. There's some interesting research too by Janine Baxter and Paco Perales and Sandra at Boling at University of Queensland and they basically showed that when people enter into parenthood they become more traditional.

[\(00:50:35\)](#):

So there is this kind of shift in attitudes, like what happens if people actually start to become less egalitarian and what happens when you have the pressure of kids and care and it becomes difficult to do in part 'cause you're in an institutional structure doesn't allow it. So this is my long way of saying I think that these issues are complex and if they're easy, easy to solve, we would solve 'em. And I think that sometimes there's, there is movement, there is a shift, but it can feel like not quick enough and it can feel like individuals, what do we do in our day-to-day lives when we want something different but our workplaces haven't adapted? That's where the key power is to have leadership who's on board. And I don't just mean the CEOs, I mean like managers, like your direct leader. What do we value?

[\(00:51:19\)](#):

What do we think is important? And this is where I think caregiving is the key. So what do we value? Do we value productivity? Do we value a growing GDP? Do we value efficiency? Sure. Do we value care? No. Should we value care? Absolutely. Because caregiving is gonna absorb a huge part of our GDP, this is gonna be the issue in the next 20, 30 years. In part because you have an ageing population. So care is actually gonna become a bigger issue or a question or need or demand. And if we still think about this as just women's work and it should be unpaid and done for free, wow, we're gonna be way disadvantaged if we're not more proactive in thinking about how to equalise care. So for me, caregiving is the key economic issue of the future. And how do we value that

Liam Byrne [\(00:52:07\)](#):

And how do we value that? I suppose it's a question. I mean at the moment Australia's having a lot of conversations about our economy and what matters and how we measure things. And there are things that are relatively easy to measure. Industrial output would be one. And yet there are things which are just fundamental to the quality of life that we have and our, our society yet, which are difficult to measure such as care, which is an increasingly, as you mentioned, large part of our economy, but it's also something that we all rely on at some point of our lives. The skilled, dedicated, professional contribution that's made by sectors which have been undervalued. So how do we change that around and appropriately measure and value that contribution to our society?

Lisa Heap [\(00:52:41\)](#):

Well, I mean I think it's really interesting in this lead up to the economic reform round table, the focus on productivity. And I would say that it's not the crisis that people are constructing it as at the moment. Sure it's problematic in most OECD countries post COVID. There are issues and those sorts of things. But for me, when the Albanese government came in, in the first instance, Jim Chalmers released a sort of new framework that he wanted to promote, which was called Measuring what Matters. And the idea behind that framework was that we just can't keep measuring everything by G looking at GDP output and stuff like that. We've gotta look at other things. And to me that's a whole, you know, I don't necessarily agree with everything in that framework and I think the framework could be more comprehensive than it is, but it's a whole, uh, framework that just seems to be ignored.

[\(00:53:28\)](#):

So that idea that we would start the conversation even a few years back when the albanese government first came in and start talking about this, it's gotta have been sidelined completely. You know, we're coming up again to a nicking forum round table and all we can hear is G-D-P-G-D-P,

productivity, productivity, you know, that idea needs to be given time and we need to be measuring alternatives. So rather than always saying, how are we gonna deal with the fact that it's hard to measure care outcomes and the quality of care in considerations around GDP and productivity, why aren't we saying actually we probably should be measuring more than just GDP, we need to be measuring other things, quality of life, uh, outcomes and the like, rather than forcing care and the measuring of care into those sorts of measures that don't fit very well, but measure equally other factors, then that seems to me to be one way of looking at it.

(00:54:26):

But my concern about that would be if you do that, does that become a residual kind of thing? And again, do we have a system that say, oh, okay, so the areas where women dominate in the care area, well we measure them by these things and they, they're kind of not as important as if we are measuring real productivity through GDP and those sorts of things. So we've gotta do it in a way that connects this idea that it's not just GDP outcome that we are worried about, but these other things. But they are measured equally. And so to me that comes back to the whole sort of genesis of this problem. We have not in this country, we have not seen the work that women do as equal to technical scientific work that men do. So why is it the case that supporting people in their most vulnerable time, caring for them in their most vulnerable times, why is that not measured is equal terms as if you've got a certificate that says you've actually can use this piece of equipment.

(00:55:27):

Technical things are being measured and being more highly measured. Then the fact that I might understand and show empathy to you, uh, that I might um, be able to understand your needs at the end of life circumstance and give you comfort at the end of life has not been measured as equal. That's fundamental to me about why we, we still have that problem in Australia. I'm doing a piece of research at the moment, which is looking at this question about invisible skills in some areas and, and particularly in nursing really when you look at the complexity of interactions that are going on for people where you've, you know, got people in their most vulnerable positions that you know they're injured or dying, you've got having to manage care systems that don't necessarily recognise the amount of care that needs to be given or resources that need to be given to that. You're managing that in a public hospital setting or in a private hospital setting with all the tensions and pressures around that. Why is that not seen as really highly skilled and recognised?

Liam Byrne (00:56:31):

Now Leah, there's a concept, uh, as well, which is the idea of a motherhood penalty and the way that that operates within the world of work and in particular impact that has on women and women's careers. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that concept, uh, and what the significance of it's.

Leah Ruppner (00:56:45):

So the idea of the motherhood penalty is this notion that you start to see this gap emerge in particular around wages, around earnings. When women become transition into motherhood, they become others. As I say this, you're gonna say like, okay, but isn't it actually that they just reduce their work time or isn't it actually that they just show up to work in different ways? And the answer is, we control for all of that, right? Like we know what you're about to say to us, so don't worry. We have the alternative explanations down and we're trying to isolate this gap. And so that's something that emerges from mothers specifically. Now if, if the idea isn't that mothers are showing up with fewer skills or they're showing up differently or they're dropping down to part-time work, well then what is it, right? What is explaining it? If we have this kind of gap that remains part of that is what we expect in terms of when parents show back up at work and in particular mothers, we have a cultural expectation or attitude that they are fragmented, that they're exhausted, that they're distracted, that they're not as serious about work, that they're gonna take time off.

(00:57:46):

And you know that sometimes people will fire women even before they have their babies, right? And part of those laws that came in and said, no, no, no, you can't discriminate just because someone has become pregnant is because you can imagine that ideology of that person is gonna be less committed to this job. They are not gonna be the ideal worker the minute they have that baby is why you have to put a policy in to say you can't do that. It's also why women often don't disclose, right? They don't tell people they're pregnant at work because they expect that they're gonna be treated differently the minute they announce their pregnancy, that they're gonna be sidelined, that they're gonna be seen as someone who can't travel for work or they're not gonna be able to put in the extra hours. We're gonna give them more interesting projects to a man.

(00:58:30):

This idea that all of a sudden sometimes too the idea that women have better emotional skills, get some different projects that may not match their skills, right? So these assumptions about what women are good at and what what men are quote unquote good at are all rooted in stereotypes and they actually don't help. One of the things we've been trying to do through our gender equity initiative is we have this parenting work skill certificate. And the idea is basically how do you help people understand that that experience is actually life-changing skill enhancing and is not dead time, it's not skill deteriorating, it actually is building key and critical future work skills. Anyone who's had a caregiving gap knows you come back, changed, you come back more empathetic, you come back with better time management, you come back more creative, you come back more dedicated. There's breadth of research showing that parents are actually, you know, they show up with more productivity, they're more dedicated to their employer, they're good workers, they're not gonna look for another job, they're there. And so how do you help people understand that? 'cause part of that is there's this expectation that you're less serious about the job the minute you have a caregiving demand and in particular parenthood. And that contributes to the motherhood gap. It happens for dads too, right? This is gonna happen for men and men can anticipate that penalty. Like oof, I don't want my employer to know that I'm leaving to go care for my kid. Or you know, they do this protective stuff but we'll let women be the sacrificial one.

Lisa Heap (00:59:52):

I mean the evidence does show that men don't take up flexible work arrangements and the like in the same proportionate as women and they're more likely interestingly to be refused flexible work. So do you think uh, Leah, that that idea that they know that in advance and so they aren't taking those things and then because they're potentially also the ones who earn higher salary, it makes more sense when they have that family conversation to say, okay, well you know, I'll stay at work, I won't have those penalties and you know, we can afford more that your income is the one that's sacrificed if you are a woman on the low paid the mother on the low paid income than we we're dealing with very stereotypical binary male, male female relationships here. But that's just perpetuating the idea then that we're never gonna get beyond the, the idea that it's gonna be men who stay and women do the work at home. So then it just perpetuates that cycle as well. Yeah,

Leah Ruppanner (01:00:49):

Absolutely. So I guess what I wanna say to you is there's a motherhood penalty and there's a fatherhood penalty too. Fatherhood. Yeah. I think men know it's risky. What you're saying, Lisa, is like it's risky for all of us to ask for our workplaces to be kinder to us. And there is that added burden of, but I'm expected to be the family breadwinner or I'm making more money. So how do we bring 'em together and say, actually what needs to change is we need to understand the research about what actually works at work first and then let's start from that model about, you know, how do we make sure that this works for men and women? Men wanna be greater caregivers, they wanna be more involved, they don't wanna be 24 7 at work, it's stressful, it's bad for their health. How do we

open up opportunities for them to step into care in the ways they want without a penalty? And how do we make sure that women, if they wanna step back into work and do more of the work, can do that without the penalty of shame, guilt from the social penalty, but then also the economic penalty too. And that again is where you need those at the higher levels managers that you need organisational awareness, understanding and change. Otherwise individuals are trying to negotiate this and navigate it. And that is a such a hard position to put them in 'cause they can't win.

Lisa Heap ([01:02:01](#)):

I'm kind of beyond the opening up choice, um, business because I feel for me that idea that you kind of open the doors and then women will walk through I think is kind of a little bit for me because I'll give this example. I mean Mo, most of my research has been in the area of gender based violence and harassment and really looking at what drives gender-based violence and harassment. And we've gotta kind of focus on that in Australia at the moment, which is kind of good, kind of not so good because the reality is, you know, we know that it's structural, we know that it's systemic and what have you like that, but all of the initiatives seem to be really focused still on this as being an behavioural problem. We've got a few bad apples who are behaving badly and we've gotta stop that from happening.

([01:02:41](#)):

So then we have statements like zero tolerance of violence and harassment and blah blah blah, which are important. But in my mind that's not where it's at. For example, a forum that I was in where people were sort of like talking about how this sort of manifests in a more broad way and the example that one organisation was giving and of course the CEO from this organisation said, I was just appalled that my daughter's friend experienced this discrimination. And this is the example of how we have to deal with gender-based discrimination to deal with violence and harassment at work. So of course we've got the only became this CEO's understanding of the problem until it when he had personal connection to the issue. So his daughter's friend, she worked in a firm and that firm actually allowed their people to go to the rugby league grand final interstate, the guys to go in the team to go to the rugby league grand final interstate paid for by the company over the weekend.

([01:03:34](#)):

And the women didn't get to go. And so we were in this forum and I could see comments on the online going, oh my goodness, that's awful. You know, that's direct discrimination, not having the women there, the women should be allowed to go. And my question, which actually was a cl 'cause it felt deaf ears, was why organisation promoting as a reward for behaviour in the workplace, promoting the idea that you'd go to the rugby league grand final on the weekend paid for by the boss. We know what that environment might look like in terms of male bonding that happens in those sorts of things. And men would be expected to go if that was offered to them and who's looking after their families at home. And the expectation was that they'd be universally available to go in that environment. And so I'm thinking there's no one else picking up this idea that that's the problem, that that was the reward system, such a gendered kind of view of that these workers would be, the male workers would want to go on the weekend, that they'd want to go to an environment which is boozy and you know, aggressive and all those sorts of things.

([01:04:41](#)):

Like the fact that I was in a forum of people who were gender experts at work in their own organisations and the concern they had was that the women didn't get invited and that that would be fixed by the women being invited to that event and people weren't seeing it. And these were people who were gender experts in their organ organisations who were in this forum and they didn't see it. So for me, this idea that we've got so much more work to do on the kind of structures about what is seen as work, what work is valued and the like, that just this kind of choice environment is, is really problematic for me

Liam Byrne ([01:05:19](#)):

Now for this podcast. We've had opportunity to hear a lot about the struggles of women workers of feminists who've transformed a great deal and tackled this sexism. But for all that has changed, a huge amount has stayed the same. So I think this discussion has really demonstrated systemically in terms of structures, in terms of attitudes, in terms of culture. And a lot still needs to change in terms of some of those examples. You mentioned previously that Australia's particularly gender segregated industries and workforce, but also talking about other ways that, you know, parents in general can be supported better and so on. Are there examples from the world today that kind of give us an indication about what is possible and where we could go? Or are there any examples from Australia that sort of indicate that there is potential avenues for change that should be pursued?

Leah Ruppanner ([01:05:57](#)):

It's challenging 'cause you're like in an ecosystem, so you need policies to change in important ways. And I think this is what Lisa's talking about, right? Government level. And in some ways, you know, Australia is one of the leaders in terms of the WIDIA data, right? Like actually really saying we are gonna measure it, we're gonna and name and shame, right? Like actually measure and name

Liam Byrne ([01:06:16](#)):

Leah, what's <inaudible>?

Leah Ruppanner ([01:06:17](#)):

Lisa will be better at this so she can do the answer on this one.

Lisa Heap ([01:06:19](#)):

Go for it. So the Workplace Gender Equality Act, which actually requires large corporations over a certain size to report on the gender pay gap. And that includes quite a comprehensive analysis of the things that they're doing that, that have been identified as contributing to the gap or amending the gap. So that's now a requirement of, of corporations of a certain size and the, the agency that implements that requirement and monitors that publishes that data or publishes parts of that data on an annual basis and it's referred to as <inaudible>.

Leah Ruppanner ([01:06:53](#)):

Yeah, it's interesting. So I think that actually is an important like enforcement because people actually have to then take a moment, pause, do the work, and look, I think being, having an ability to have transparency and pay would be really, really, really critical, right? Like that's a critical piece of, it's being able to see where the hotspots are, where the inequality is. There's a attitudinal change, there's gender norm changes. Janine, Bret, university of Queensland has another big project where she's gonna look at are we becoming more progressive in Australia or is actually there a stall? Are we becoming more progressive in her attitudes or is there backlash? And you can see that happening politically too, right? So there's an AAL piece, there's a policy piece about how do you have the government level policies and then there's an organisational piece. 'cause I think a lot in structures and one of the challenges on that is that a lot of people go, okay, yeah, great, but like I'm in it right now, you are asking me to change the government.

([01:07:46](#)):

And it's like, I am suffering in this moment in time. And so I've been trying to work on what are maybe the market interventions, like what can you literally maybe buy today that might help you reconcile work and family challenges. It's part of my book that's coming out drained 2026, things are letting me plug it. Some of the criticism we get, and I I'm sure you've heard this too, Lisa, right? Is like, I'm struggling right now. And so that's where I think about how do you have empathetic

managers in this moment in time where you can have men who have greater choice at work, but also women who have greater choice at work. So I think a lot about that. Is technology one of the solutions? We've been doing a lot of work on that too, right? Like can technology help lighten the load? So I think that's why I'm like, interesting question because unfortunately there's not a single answer and it's gonna be a combination of factors that will, will shift over time and actually individually shift over time. So how do you get people almost like the list of things that they should know about or have that will help for different things? That's one of my current passions is to bring together different solutions.

Liam Byrne ([01:08:51](#)):

And so in terms of the drivers of change, so we've talked about a different, a number of different aspects is from industrial law to cultural attitudes to education. In terms of those drivers, what are the most significant or is there one that's most significant or is it, as you say, it's it's all about the interaction between those different

Leah Ruppanner ([01:09:06](#)):

Drivers? I think it's all all coming together. Yeah,

Lisa Heap ([01:09:08](#)):

It is all coming together. You know, in the work that I did for my PhD thesis, I looked at this kind of transformative gender regime model, which was basically saying, how do we see this? How do we see gender at work? You know, how do we make it visible in a way that means that people will address the impact of gendered views at work. And so it is the structural, it is the cultural, it is the behavioural, all of those areas that come together that need to be addressed. The difficulty that I have is that now in Australia, the shift that's happened, particularly if we just use gender based violence and harassment as the example at work, the shift that has happened is that we now represent the problem as a structural problem. So we now say, and and and a lot of that work has come through those wonderful organisations that have done all this research around domestic and family violence in Australia have done a lot of work on how does, how does this actually happen?

([01:10:04](#)):

What's going on here? And so we know it's a structural problem in the sense that we know the drivers are not just behavioural drivers and we now state that as the problem. And for example, the Human Rights Commission's report on a Respect at work stated it as a structural problem, acknowledge things like precarity in the labour market as a key driver of what women experience is violence and harassment at work and the like. We acknowledge all of that and then the solutions become behavioural or at best behavioural and cultural. So people will talk about the culture of the organisation and they'll talk about the behaviour of the individuals and all of that structural stuff gets set aside because it's really hard to say we are gonna make organisations accountable for why do they have all these people on casual work arrangements and why are they predominantly women?

([01:10:59](#)):

What's that about? And we are gonna make them change that. My concern really is that our progress has been that we now state the problem broadly and we state that it's structural, cultural, behavioural and all of that, but our solutions are still at that end of behavioural and cultural because it's too hard to deal with the kind of structural elements. So the problem is all of those things, but unfortunately we still have too much of an emphasis in the solution. Even in things like respect at work, they stated casual employment was one of the main drivers of violence and harassment for women. They had no recommendations about how to fix that. When we say we've got, you know, and Australia is now looked at and that respect at Work framework is now looked at as one of the

world leading frameworks, but it's still only dealing with cultural and behavioural issues, not structural things.

Liam Byrne ([01:11:52](#)):

Fantastic. In this episode we've talked a little bit about the history and how it's just over 50 years ago now that equal pay became a legal right, but even though it was a legal right, it is not the lived reality still, which is really quite a, a stark reminder of the way gender inequality operates. And so I thank you both for such a incredible discussion about the reality of that today. And I think it's important to both recognise the, the long heroic struggle of, of feminists and unionists and others who've challenged these inequalities. But as you've both mentioned that it's ongoing and there's still a lot of unfinished work here and something that we all stand to benefit from if we tackle these inequalities and change the way we think about our economy, about work and about care and about all these different parts of our lives. So thank you so much for such a wonderful discussion, Leah and Lisa, and of course Marilyn who was here earlier. I'm Liam taking off the LPLs perhaps after Francis has a, allowed me to take over the pod for a little bit today, thankfully in very, very, very good company. So thank you both, uh, for being here and thank you to everybody for listening to Absolutely Revolting. We'll be back, uh, next week with some more rebels, revolutionaries, rebel rousers and other things to begin with ours. Thank you very much for listening.

Absolutely Revolting is produced with support from the Melbourne Public Humanities Initiative. It's recorded at the University of Melbourne on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Eastern Kulin Nation. The producers would like to pay their respects to the Traditional Owners, to the elders past and present, and to acknowledge their history, which goes back tens of thousands of years. The podcast is hosted by Liam Byrne and myself, Francis Leach. It's produced by Seth Robinson and edited by Courtney Carthy at Nearly Media. Thanks for listening. And join us next time as we examine the revolutions of the past, how they've shaped the present and are setting our course for the future.

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