

*Transcript - Working Fathers Episode 3 – Are Fathers Free?*



00:00 **Dan:** Welcome to Working Fathers, a podcast about dads, families and work. We look at the many different roles fathers play in contemporary Australian families and society and how policy can better recognize, value and support.

I'm Dan Halliday. I'm an Associate Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Melbourne. But more importantly, I'm also the father of four wonderful children, and I'll be your host.

So as fathers, how much freedom do we have? The fathers have real choices when it comes to decisions about how to divide their time between paid work and caring for the kids at home. And where do government and organisational policy fit in? One of the major societal changes of the past century has been the [rise of female employment](#), particularly in the peak child-rearing years.

Among the silent generation, that's people born between the years of 1925 and 1945, only about 36% of women aged 30 were in paid employment. But by the time the millennials came along, these are women born between 1980 and 1994, that number had doubled to 71%.

But over the same period, men's employment rate at the same age, 30, has shown much less change, and it's never fallen below 89%. So it's natural to ask why hasn't the rise in women's employment been accompanied by a drop in men's employment. And why is part-time work still so much less common among men than it is among women?

01:46 Now, one answer is that the patterns we're seeing here are just the product of free choices. But these choices are never getting made in a vacuum, and freedom of choice comes in degrees.

While in the next episode, we look at the role of social and moral norms around fatherhood and how these are changing, in this episode, we're going to focus on the laws, policies and organisational practices that are important here.

Our first guest is Miranda Stewart. She's a professor of law at the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, and author of several books including *Tax, Social Policy, and Gender*. Her research explores how tax laws interact with social policy and have a really strong impact on gender and family dynamics.

And we spoke with her in the first episode of this series. Here she starts by talking us through some of the basics.

02:38 **Miranda:** So, I am legally trained, I'm a law academic, and my specialisation is taxes and welfare. We call it transfers in the jargon. So, money into government, taxes, money out of government, transfers. Cash transfers. And from quite early in my career it became apparent to me that tax laws have a differential impact in respect of gender.

And that's partly because of the way that taxes interact with family payments, child payments, childcare, parental leave, this kind of suite of policies. But tax law, the design of tax law, how we tax work, how we allow exemptions or credits for families has quite a strong gender impact.

It could be positive for gender equality or it could be reinforcing unequal social and economic patterns. I've brought together research over the years looking at that intersection between tax and social policy and gender.

**03:37 Dan:** Now, let's be honest. The intricacies of taxation law aren't the sort of thing that's going to excite everyone. But one fascinating point that Miranda Stewart raises is that a basic element of tax design is what is known as the unit of assessment.

In plain language, what that refers to is whether the tax system is taxing people as individuals based on their individual earnings or as a couple or family unit or household based on their combined earnings.

Now, it turns out that this can make quite a bit of difference to couples' decision-making around work and care, particularly once children arrive.

**04:14 Miranda:** Yeah. So a little bit of Tax 101 just to kind of set the scene. Most people in Australia who are working will know that they pay income tax and that's based on their wage or other income and it's on an individual basis. And so when you have an individual tax unit, the salary you earn when you go to work and your deductions and you're taxed on a progressive rate structure and that's both equitable and fair.

Tax systems that have a joint or couple unit, the US is an example or Germany is another example. What they do is they put the income of two members of the couple together. It's usually a heterosexual couple. So husband and wife. And then they apply a sort of tax rate structure to that joint income.

The effect of that actually is to create a disincentive for the second earner's work in the household. Because you can imagine when you put two incomes together, one piles on top of the other in terms of more income for the household as a whole, which is then subject to tax.

Whereas if you just have one breadwinner and one dependent home homemaker in that couple, usually there'll be less tax owed. Essentially, when you're comparing breadwinner

homemaker families versus dual-earner families, in some tax structures you get a bias against the dual-earner family unless you otherwise support childcare or things like that.

**05:36 Dan:** But as Miranda goes on to explain, although Australia taxes our income as individuals, when it comes to our family payment system, we become more like the couple unit system that creates barriers to mothers' paid employment. So what is this family payment system?

**05:54 Miranda:** Those provisions include childcare subsidy, which is a subsidy for paid childcare, what we call family tax benefit A and B, which are payments for families that have children with various income tests.

Paid parental leave is another example of a policy like that. So our social policies, our social welfare payments for families in Australia are income-tested. They don't go to everyone, they're not universal.

They cut out at a certain level of income. And that makes them progressive, of course. Right, so low-income families benefit more. However they're tested on joint income of the couple.

So if you have a situation where you've got one or two young children in the household and you still have very often what we call a primary earner, someone whose salary perhaps is higher or more consistent and who is less responsible for care of the children in the household as part of the kind of social and family decision that that family makes.

The other person in the household, the other carer and parent we would sometimes call the secondary earner. They might be more easily able to go part-time. They might have a lower wage or they have a preference or the family has a preference or there are social norms that suggest that that person should look after the children at home.

And so that's a gendered dynamic. You can see that it's very often the case, not always, but very often the case that the primary earner is male, is the father and the secondary earner is the mother in a heterosexual family.

07:25 So you can imagine a situation again, if you have a primary earner who perhaps is on average full-time male wages, which is around about 90,000 a year. The second earner's wage kind of is added on top in terms of working out whether those family payments, whether the family is still eligible for payments for children, right?

Or whether their income becomes too high and they start to lose those payments. And we withdraw payments for children on the basis at about \$0.30 on the dollar or \$0.20 on the dollar over a threshold. So as the second earner starts to earn more income, maybe goes from like a day or two of work a week to three or four or five days of work a week, the family's joint income increases.

08:11 We go over the income threshold and they start to lose family benefits. They lose their benefits per child. And our other payments, childcare subsidy and to a lesser extent, parental leave which is designed differently are also tested on joint income.

So the same effect occurs. So we have built into our tax and transfer system for families a kind of quasi-joint unit which discourages women's workforce participation, paid workforce participation.

If the second earner, usually the mother, chooses to increase her work hours in the market, the family has to pay the net childcare cost, net of the subsidy, and it might lose family payments. And then she starts to pay income tax, of course, because now she's earning a wage.

09:00 And when you put all that together, the net disposable income from that work might be only \$0.20 out of a dollar remaining, right? Something like that. The effective tax rate on her labour could be as much as 80%.

That is, the family is no better off or not much better off by her working in the market. Okay, so that's a kind of long-winded way of trying to explain that, these policy settings, the combination of the tax law, the sort of family payments rules, and childcare subsidy rules together create this disincentive for women's workforce participation.

So I think there's a very strong economic drive, not just social norms, kind of economic reason why we still have this kind of 1.5-earner family as our dominant family structure for families with children. And that's a gendered structure.

**09:55 Vox Pop Dad (M):** I suppose if you talk about the gender pay gap, that generally speaking, men earn more than women, so if you're going to make a choice around who does what, well, it kind of makes sense to get the person who can earn the most money to earn the money.

And it kind of makes sense for the person that the kids love the best to do that, to do the child-caring part. But again, to have a full and balanced life is what you hope for, for your children and what you're trying to achieve for yourself.

So I think life can be richer than just being pigeonholed into the way it's always been done in the past. But there's a lot of impediments to reaching that utopia. Because the reality is, any, what I would consider a decent job that pays well expects your first priority in life to be the organisation.

**10:47 Vox Pop Dad (C):** That was interesting. I think 15 years ago I was contemplating this today in terms of the people that worked with me who were going on paternity leave. That didn't exist today. Paternity leave. So there was a very natural and well-worn path in terms of the mother staying at home and being the primary caregiver because my wife could get maternity leave and there was no such thing as paternity leave.

So I think that didn't seem like a big decision for us. And I think there was also a question of who was being able to financially contribute the most. And at that point that was me as well.

**11:25 Dan:** Of course, most of us are not experts in the tax and transfer system like Miranda is. We asked how much economic concerns influence household decisions about who's going to remain in paid work and for how many hours once children arrive.

**11:40 Miranda:** Obviously, there are probably also social and cultural factors and social and cultural norms. I'm not a researcher on those things. But what I do observe is that our

economic limits on women's work participation when they are mothers of young children, these are quite strong barriers.

**11:58 Dan:** So economic factors overlaid onto pre-existing gender patterns tend to mean that a 1.5-earner model is the norm for heterosexual households. But what about same-sex couples with kids with just the economic factors at play, do they do things more equally?

**12:16 Miranda:** The evidence shows that they do share care more equally and they share time in the household, housework, if you like, more equally than heterosexual couples. Of course, these are all statistical norms, right?

There's always exceptions to these generalisations. But this is based on the statistical data. I suppose you could say that same-sex couples, that would just depend on the economics of the families, but might have more equal wages or might have more equal economic relationships generally.

And again, there is some evidence that you'll be more likely to have dual-earner couples even when you've got children in the household and in fact that you work quite hard to maintain both partners' earnings.

**12:58** In terms of the law in Australia since 2009, all federal laws recognized domestic partnerships of same-sex couples and I think it's 2017 when gay marriage was legislated and so the same rules apply as for heterosexual couples whether married or de facto.

The irony of that is that it actually means that same-sex couples are kind of pushed into the traditional economic breadwinner-homemaker model because they're now subject to the same joint income testing, the same disincentives to work that heterosexual couples are, whereas historically they would have been outside those legal regimes.

So that's one of the ironies of equality before the law is that you also become more equal in the sense of being subject to the normative structures of the economic and social policy of the day.

13:52 **Dan:** By normative structures, Miranda means to talk about the morally significant ways in which economic and social policies push households towards a particular way of doing things when it comes to the division of paid and unpaid labour.

And as she's already indicated, there are significant differences across countries. For example, governments differ in the amount of paid parental leave they offer and to whom as well as in the accessibility and affordability of childcare.

But underlying these apparently dry matters of welfare policy are some pretty fundamental political and philosophical questions. Back in the 1990s, a philosopher called Nancy Fraser, currently a professor of philosophy and politics at the New School for Social Research in the USA, wrote what would become a classic article.

It was called "[After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State.](#)" As we heard in episode two, the family wage refers to the old breadwinner model, thus the idea that the male head of a heterosexual household earns enough to keep his wife and children.

But Fraser argued the breadwinner model is just not fit for purpose. It doesn't describe contemporary households, most of which cannot maintain expected living standards on a single male wage, and an increasing number of which are single-headed or same-sex households.

15:16 The breadwinner model is also no longer compatible with contemporary gender norms and expectations. Fraser's question was this, given that the breadwinner model is not accurate anymore, what new model should policymakers have in mind?

Should the goal be to make mothers' lives more like fathers so that both parents get to be breadwinners? Should it be to reduce the economic penalties and risks for people, usually women, who reduce their hours in the workforce to take care of children?



Should it be to try to create a situation in which both parents can combine paid work and caregiving in a more equal way? So how do different welfare policies push towards alternatives to the breadwinner model? Miranda shares her insights.

**16:03 Miranda:** So I guess the Nordic states stand out, if anyone who studies social welfare systems or social policy is aware of the sort of model that Sweden, Denmark, to a lesser extent Norway, Finland and Iceland.

So they collect a lot more tax as a share of their gross domestic product, as a share of GDP than we do. But they also deliver much more expansive benefits. And they deliver a lot of universal benefits or public goods.

So very much free or almost free childcare, for example, very substantial paid parental leave programs, a much wider free education. So all the way from young children all the way through until they become adults, they have much higher women's workforce participation and many more women working full time.

**16:58** So we can kind of impute from that these things make a difference, right? This policy design makes a difference. They also have a general expectation that full-time working hours are perhaps not as high as full-time working hours in Australia.

Because you've got to sort of think, well, how do families manage not just the time when they're at work, but the margins before and after work, the transitions between home and work for their children and for themselves.

And some of those costs are kind of quite high. In our country, commuting costs take time and money. Child care isn't always available nearby and so on. So it's partly structural and it's partly the economic cost of these things.

**17:36 Dan:** So the Nordic countries seem to provide much more support for both parents to work full time while also managing caring responsibilities. And to do that, they provide plenty of cheap childcare. It's a public investment in creating a society in which both parents can work.

Now, this might seem like primarily a change in the way we think about mother's role in society, but it also represents quite a major shift in how we think about father's role as well. No longer are dads assumed to be the sole or primary economic providers in a household.

The possibility is opened up for equal contributions to both economic providing and caring for children. Or to put it another way, it's deliberately building an erosion of the traditional division of labor into policy. Here's more from Miranda.

**18:25 Miranda:** You could think of the childcare subsidy or delivering childcare services as public investment in children and perhaps public investment in women's workforce participation. That is a sort of more general societal assumption that most adults should work in the market most of the time, which actually is kind of the assumption in the Nordic states.

And in order to achieve that, you have to socialise care to some extent, right? You have to have collective provision for care. And so childcare policies of any kind achieve that. And the question just is how far do you go?

So in my view, Australia is really, we've had various kinds of childcare since the 70s, public childcare. And of course rich families have always had nannies, right, have always outsourced care. But it's only since the 70s we've started to kind of do that as a community, socialise that care economically.

And I think we're in this transition, we are moving towards more public child care. Every policy change is incrementally to expand the delivery of childcare, not to retract it. Government came to the election and announced in the budget that it will further expand the childcare subsidy.

**19:38** It still won't cover the full cost. It still will be tested on joint income. This issue of kind of creating a disincentive for the second earner's work will still remain for quite a substantial number of families.

There are other features about our childcare policy that really need attention. We have, again, just as we do in high school, we have strongly privatised childcare. We have a lot of diversity in the sector.

Some public care, some family care, some community-based care and private-for-fee care. And that means that if you deliver subsidies, there's a risk of what we call rent-seeking, right? That it will just push the price up.

And so the benefit doesn't go to families, it goes to the childcare providers, and in particular for-profit providers. Also, wages in the sector are very low. The government has said that they're looking to increase wages in the sector.

**20:29** So the challenge is going to be how do you redesign a system so you can deliver decent wages, adequately, universal or very broadly public-provided care, without kind of making it too costly on the public budget?

**20:44 Dan:** So could it be that childcare policy, working alongside other complementary forces, finally breaks the old breadwinner model? This would allow partners to be both parents and workers in a less gendered structure.

Here's more from Miranda about this, also drawing attention to why this matter is not just for parents themselves, but Australian society and the economy more widely.

**21:07 Miranda:** I think they are intended to change that dynamic and that's a big task. I do think we have these rather strong social and cultural norms, but if we can unpick some of the economic constraints that are holding that family structure in place, then I think we will see movement in that regard.

It's actually very important for Australia because like most of the world, we have declining fertility and an ageing population. So in Australia, fertility is what we call replacement ranges of 1.6 at the moment.

So 2.1 is actually full replacement, population replacement to maintain a stable population. So our ratio is 1.6 children per household on average. So we have a lot of net inward migration and that helps maintain our population.

But we also need to maintain our fertility levels. And I think to achieve that, we actually have to find a way to solve this problem that we have about socialising care. And because we have an ageing population, we need to access that labour supply, which is women working in the home.

**22:15** You might call over specialising in care for an ever smaller number of children instead of delivering the kind of skills and benefits to the labour market and the population as a whole. So these policies will make a difference.

As I said, I feel like we're still in transition. We haven't fully grasped the kind of social and economic implications of our current policy. The government is a bit constrained by short-term fiscal cost at the expense of long-term thinking, long-term about the society as a whole and economic benefit of that.

**22:49 Dan:** In Australia, the first national paid parental leave scheme was introduced on the 1st of January 2011. It allowed two weeks for dad and partner pay at the national minimum wage, while parental leave pay, usually taken by birth mothers, was 18 weeks.

It's worth thinking about what norm this leave scheme expressed about dads roles in their children's and family's lives. A new baby creates immense change in a family. They need round-the-clock care and attention.

And yet, after just a fortnight, dads are expected to resume their roles as breadwinners and go back to full-time continuous work. This year, on July 1st, 2023, paid parental leave and dad and partner pay are combining and extending.

**23:38** By 2026, eligible parents will be entitled to 26 weeks, which can be shared between parents. On the face of it, it seems like this change reflects a shift away from the male breadwinner norm with a more gender-neutral scheme that should expand choices for fathers.

Question is, is it really? Miranda points out that differences in earnings are still going to be a major factor in this decision. And this brings us back to the same issue that arises when it comes to family payments, which is that mothers tend to earn less than fathers.

**24:08 Miranda:** So the economic challenge you have there is that if men are earning more in the labour market than women, the economic incentive needed to persuade men to take some time out from work has to be higher, right?

It costs more to kind of overcome that differential. Either the employer pays more, is mandated by law to pay more to fathers when they're on parental leave for a longer period of time. But the other thing that could be done in a policy design, and Australian activists have argued for this is that there'd be a share of the parental leave that is mandated for the partner or the father.

Usually in countries that do that, the leave period is longer than six months. So the challenge we have here is that we've got 26 weeks of parental leave. And if you were to mandate some of that for fathers or partners, you're actually reducing the share that the mother, for physical and family reasons, might be good for her to keep.

**25:09** In my view, again, not everyone would agree with that assessment. So I still think we need to expand parental leave to be longer. And then we could consider, mandating, that some part of it is shared or transferred to the other, the partner. It's a kind of use it or lose it idea that's been advocated.

**25:30 Dan:** Miranda's point here is borne out by the empirical research. This suggests that generous "use it or lose it" daddy leave is most effective in encouraging fathers to actually take parental leave. So what else needs to happen to create change? Here are Miranda's final comments.

**25:46 Miranda:** So I would advocate universal free child care. I mean, I would advocate that childcare should be treated like primary school education. In the 1870s, we started to introduce public education for primary school children in the UK. In Australia, it didn't exist

before that, it was seen as an essential element in economic development and prosperity for the nation.

So to me, this is a similar issue that involves reconfiguring this idea of what early childhood education and care does. But we need to acknowledge that families, both men and women need to have room to do caring around their working lives.

So men need to have more flexibility in the labour market, need to have employer support which may have to be regulated or mandated. I mean, I think the evidence is fairly clear that, well, giving people a choice is a good thing, but it's not actually going to push those norms enough.

**26:44** I think we do need that pay parental care and then we need to sort of acknowledge that the children are kind of for the benefit of all of us. Children are not just a private consumption item or for private benefit of the family. They're actually essential to the fabric and the future of our society. So we should all be treating it that way.

**27:09 Vox Pop Dad (M):** I think it all starts at that first maternity leave piece and I think what they've done in a lot of the Scandinavian countries where to be able to access your full benefit, it needs to be spread across the two of you.

**27:25 Vox Pop Dad (R):** I remember when I first started here. I used to come in at 9:30ish. I'd come in and I remember a comment someone made, it's like, "*Oh, you come in a bit late though, don't you?*" Or something like that.

I felt like I had to justify myself explaining that I had to drop the kids off. There was a little bit I could feel in that comment, a little bit of judgement that I should have been at work by 09:00.

**27:49 Dan:** So Miranda is an advocate for paid parental leave and for trying to reduce obstacles to men taking it up. But even in Sweden, which is famed for its generous "use it or lose it" paternity leave, dads still take much less parental leave than mothers do, even though couples are reporting having this preference for more equal sharing.

So why is this? A few clues have come from a recent interview study of Swedish fathers conducted by [Linda Haas and C. Philip Hwang published in 2019](#). They interviewed male employees from both blue-collar and white-collar private companies and found that fathers routinely experience cultural and structural obstacles in the form of what is known as the ideal worker norm.

**28:38** This involves the assumption that workers will be constantly available and that work should always come before family. The research found that this norm was embedded in cultural norms, policies and infrastructure, leaving the Swedish fathers they interviewed really feeling unable to take much or any of the paternity leave to which they were legally entitled.

This points to the familiar insight that policies need cultural support to move from paper to actual practice. So what about flexible work policies often presented as a solution to promoting gender equality by enabling parents and especially mothers, to combine work and family commitments?

**29:14 Heejung:** I've been always curious about how work relates to our lives and how we can make work better to ensure that people can really do what they want to do, but also fulfil their most kind of valuable behaviours if you want in life.

**29:32 Dan:** Our next guest is Heejung Chung, who is professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Kent in the UK and the author of "[The Flexibility Paradox: Why Flexible Working Leads to \(Self-\)Exploitation.](#)"

With fewer and fewer households following this traditional breadwinner-homemaker model, time and scheduling conflicts are arising between caring responsibilities and the paid work. Heejung is interested in when and how flexible work can help people resolve these conflicts and, more broadly, allow space for valued activities outside of work. So we asked Heejung, why flexible work is important?

**30:15 Heejung:** So let me start first with why it could be a great not just gender equality, but all sorts of labour market equality enhancer or enabler. So this is something a lot of mothers experienced during the pandemic.

So, if you're unable to work flexible schedules and work from home, a lot of women usually kind of move out of the labour market or move to part-time work. And part-time work is usually penalised and we don't have the same kind of career opportunities.

And this is why we see a huge gender pay gap in many of our societies. Now, if you were to enable mothers to have flexible schedules as well as work from home, you reduce that likelihood. So you wouldn't completely eliminate it.

**30:58** But you really enhance mothers to be able to combine work with family life much better than if you were to have fixed schedules and fixed kind of working spaces such as in the office. Now, that's great.

And that kind of pattern you find not only for women but people with other care responsibilities such as elderly care and former care responsibilities, but also people with self-care responsibilities which means like disabled workers or people with long-term illnesses.

And you see also kind of perhaps similar patterns found for other people of marginalized positions, maybe race or gender identities, et cetera.

**31:32 Dan:** Now, this all sounds pretty positive so far and it is positive. But is there a downside?

**31:38 Heejung:** Now, we have to also understand this. When we enable mothers to be able to kind of take part in the labour market through flexible working, what we're not doing is we're not really reshaping the work that is done in the household.



So with flexible working, what mothers are able to do is actually carry out the amount of housework and childcare that they have to do and on top of that, do more paid work. So, we don't disrupt this whole gender normative views about whose role it is to care.

So women are ending up having to do the double or triple shift of doing the full-time work whilst doing the large bulk of housework and childcare. So it's really enforcing this traditional gender division of labour.

On top of that, I think what flexible working can potentially do is to enable employers to not have to change the norm about who the worker is. We're still really based on the idea that there's a one breadwinner and the other partner is doing all the reproductive work.

**32:41** So we haven't changed our labour market structures enough to really facilitate two parents to come into the labour market in an equal manner. We've really only enabled one parent to fully take part while the other really has to sacrifice one way or the other.

Flexible working may enable both parents to do so, but that means it is sacrificing usually the mother's leisure private time where they are squeezing in a housewife's worth of childcare and housework as well as a full-time worker's work worth of paid work without extending their 24 hours day which hasn't changed the last time I checked.

**33:20** So this is why a lot of feminist scholars have talked about the exploitation model of flexible working and this is why there is this potential of actually exacerbating and maintaining some of these problematic social and household structures.

**33:36 Dan:** Paradoxically then, flexible work can actually entrench the breadwinner model and leave mothers with more work than ever. And as Heejung goes on to explain, echoing many of our other guests, this nudging back towards traditional patterns goes against couples' more egalitarian preferences, particularly in professional occupations.

**33:59 Heejung:** So there is a kind of another paradox, like, for example with flexible working, but in the division of housework and childcare. So generally speaking, those with a higher education have what we consider more of the more egalitarian gender norms.

So they have the attitude that oh yeah, men and women should take part both in the labour market, that they should both take part in housework and childcare. So the attitude is more egalitarian. Having said that, the pattern we find with flexible working as well as just division of labour well, you find as working-class men do more and this is more due to economic necessities.

34:39 So for example, they do tag-team parenting or shift-working type patterns where one parent would work very, very early but pick the kids up early. The other parent kind of gets the children to school, but then works till late.

So essentially that kind of flexible working is really beneficial for those families to not have to rely on outsourced formal childcare and maximise the working hours of parents. And through those things, actually working class or lower income group fathers can actually use flexible working for more egalitarian or better division of housework and labour.

35:15 Whereas higher educated men because there is the ideal worker norm, again like this idea of the culture that you have to really work long hours. And so what happens is, despite the fact that a lot of these higher-educated men believe in gender equality, at least in their heads, they end up having to live up to this ideal worker norm where you have to be working all the time, really burning the candle at both ends and work longer and harder when they have flexible boundaries between work and family life.

So these are the men that really are party to what I say is the flexibility paradox where when you get that control over your work of when and where you work, they end up working all the time and everywhere.

36:00 **Dan:** So is there a way out of this conundrum of parents being pushed back into the traditional breadwinner model even when couples would prefer to have more multidimensional lives? Heejung has a number of suggestions about this. These range from the parental leave policies we've already heard about to the way we actually think about economic productivity.

**36:21 Heejung:** Well, I think, first of all, we should all work less. Work historians have shown that some of the greatest thinkers in the world actually only work 6 hours a day because your brain capacity or your brain to do really meaningful deep thinking, you really need to actually do lots of walking and do other things.

The work element should only be about 4 to 6 hours maximum. So that's one thing. But also we have to go beyond that. I mean, that can actually partly solve the gender inequality pattern because we will give fathers more time to do other things outside of work.

**36:56** As I said, one of the biggest barriers being long hours work in terms of why fathers don't do more in the household. So fathers being able to use some of the time to do housework and childcare will enable mothers to take better part in the labour market.

But I think that's not enough. I think we really need to have national policies or company policies as well to enable fathers to do much more in the household, especially when children are young. I'm talking about very generous daddy leaves or paternity leaves, if you want, where you make fathers kind of spend six months when the child is less than a year old by themselves with good, generous benefits so that they could be the primary carer and mothers could be the primary carers for the first six to eight months, and then the fathers could be it for another six months, which really will help equalise the ideas of whose responsibility it is to care.

**37:47** If we were to have it, we will see that this gender pattern of flexible working or flexibility paradox reduce significantly. And I think, again, at the company level, one of the things that we do see, the really great benefits of flexible working and homeworking are not being seen because we still have this very long hours work culture.

Unfortunately, even now some of the measurements of what we consider productivity is based on industrialised 19th century beliefs and patterns. Like, so if you're in the factory for 8 hours, this is the amount of output you will have, kind of idea.

But with knowledge work, it's nothing like that. The number of hours you sit in front of a desk does not equate to productivity at all. But we still kind of even subconsciously promote people on those basis and say "*Oh, that guy Mick is in the office until 10:00 p.m. and he's a really hard-working guy...*" and he gets promoted, he gets the better project opportunities and

we really need to change that because first of all, it is really driving us to this very bad work culture where really we're squeezing out every other aspects of our lives other than work.

**39:01** And it is damaging not only to the workers themselves in terms of burnout and stress, but also their family because they don't have time to spend with their spouse or their partner, children as well, or their elderly parents, but also society as a whole.

Because I think only when and this kind of comes back to the point we were talking about earlier, but I think we really need to try to foster the multitude that is a human being.

**39:29 Dan:** The norm of the ideal worker who works long hours or is constantly available is often not spoken about, but it's nonetheless powerful. How do we even begin to reshape a norm like that?

**39:38 Heejung:** Obviously not look at long hours of work as a measurement of productivity, but think about what are the most meaningful things and through that also maybe try eliminate some of the more frivolous unnecessary kind of activities at work.

It could be paperwork, but it could be long endless meetings that actually end up with nothing really fruitful and really focus on what is important, what are the targets and trust your workers to beat those targets without you having to micromanage when it's done and where it's done.

**40:10 Dan:** Well, having fewer pointless meetings does seem like something we can all get behind. But Heejung also suggests that we do something more radical, which is to start thinking of flexible work, not as an accommodation for less committed workers with caring responsibilities, but actually as a form of performance enhancement.

**40:30 Heejung:** I mean, the other thing is, especially in terms of enabling kind of more of a gender-egalitarian society as well as families, I think companies have a really big role here. Again, with the femininity stigma of fathers, it is still the fathers that feel really that fear about the stigmatisation if they were to kind of use that flexible working for care or in private purposes.

So one of the things that has to be said is that, oh, flexible working is definitely not only a work-life balance policy, but this is a performance-enhancing thing. The types of workers that we glorify or look up to shouldn't be someone who is sacrificing their health, family to meet whatever goal that the company wants to meet.

So we should really try to promote a healthier ideal worker role models who have better work-life balance, who are able to meet the goals, but not overdo it, and really have a long-term view about work and the work-life balance in the life course perspective.

**41:27 Dan:** So leaders have an important role here in promoting healthier ideals of work. But what can other individuals do to help resolve what Heejung calls the flexibility paradox and what's overall at stake?

**41:40 Heejung:** It's going to be tough for fathers, especially in organisations or contexts where it's really hard to try to haggle with your managers about like, oh, can I work from home? How many days a week?

But I think you really need to understand the benefits that it could have. And try to maybe do this in a collective manner. That this shouldn't be an individual negotiation with you and your manager, but something that you maybe as a group, maybe as a father's group, maybe have just group of workers, both men and women and other genders to really negotiate for a kind of better work-life balance kind of policies, including flexible working.

Because at the end of the day it is really beneficial for everybody involved and I think we just don't understand the value of getting men more involved. So, I mean, we keep thinking about men's involvement as some sort of just very uni-dimensionally as to help women get back into the labour market or take more part in the labour market.

**42:39** But that's just one side of it. In the study I did for the UK government Equalities Office, we did a whole range of literature review and some empirical analysis about what happens if fathers do a larger share of childcare.

If fathers share housework and childcare, their relationship is strengthened so that there's less likelihood that they get conflict within marriages, but also less likely to have marital dissolution, so either a divorce or separation.

43:07 It helps children, so cognitive development or academic, but also emotional development as well. And for our study we saw that fathers are happier. They're just happier generally in terms of work, life, not just work-life balance satisfaction, but life satisfaction as well as just daily enjoyment.

When they are able to engage more with children and really do a larger share rather than just dipping in and out, they are generally happier for it.

43:33 **Dan:** So we started by asking how much freedom fathers have. We've seen in this episode that there are lots of moving parts here, taxes and welfare, parental leave policy, gender pay gap, organisational norms and flexible work.

Now, we've seen many changes in the right direction over the decades, but these factors still constrain dads and mum, including same-sex couples, and systematically push heterosexual couples into traditional patterns.

The rules around taxation and the way in which people qualify for means-tested benefits like childcare subsidy actually work to encourage couples to divide themselves into a breadwinner and a homemaker.

At the same time, many workplaces still reserve the best jobs for the ideal worker and stigmatise deviations from the male norm of continuous full-time work and constant availability. But nor is flexible work necessarily the panacea we sometimes think it's going to be.

44:32 Policymakers need to think very carefully about how to promote flexible work. However, we've also heard some concrete suggestions for governments and organisations, generous parental leave, earmarked for dad, affordable and accessible childcare, organisational infrastructure that supports flexibility, and leaders and managers who promote

value and support flexible work, developing new ways of assessing productivity and using our time at work more thoughtfully.

Change is slow, but every shift can potentially take us to a better place in terms of family well-being, gender equality, and genuine freedom. If you enjoyed this episode and you're keen to support working dads and to influence policy, please share it with others.

And if you haven't already, have a listen to other episodes in this series that explore dads, families and work and ask how policy can better recognize, value and support fatherhood. Thank you for listening to the Working Fathers podcast. I'm Dan Halliday.

Many thanks to our guests, Miranda Stewart and Heejung Chung. This podcast was created by Cordelia Fine and Dan Halliday from the University of Melbourne, Melissa Wheeler from Swinburne University of Technology, and Annabelle Baldwin.

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