



Women are the Business
Season 1: Episode 6
A Conversation with Julia Gillard

Julia Gillard: I say to the leader of the opposition, I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. I will not. And the government will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. Not now. Not ever.

Sophie Thomas: I'm Sophie Thomas, and you're listening to Women are the Business. In today's episode, we're joined by a special guest.

Julia Gillard: Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia, chair of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership.

Sophie Thomas: Fabulous. Well, let's get started.

Julia Gillard: Sure.

Sophie Thomas: After studying Law and Arts here at the University of Melbourne, Julia Gillard made her way into national politics, winning a seat in Federal Parliament in 1998 where she would serve for 15 years, eventually becoming Australia's first female Prime Minister. As PM, she introduced the carbon tax, education reforms, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. She also became infamous for her speech addressing misogyny, directed at then opposition leader, Tony Abbott, which was recently voted the most unforgettable moment in Australian TV history. We were lucky enough to have Julia in our studio earlier in the year. We spoke about the key roadblocks to true gender equality, how she looks back on her career with the benefit of hindsight, and what she's been up to since she left politics. Spoiler alert, she's been busy. What have you been doing since you left parliament in 2013?

Julia Gillard: It's complicated. What I've done is put together a portfolio of things, so I don't have one big job. I have a lot of things that I do, and I very much enjoy. One of the first that I started was chairing the Global Partnership for Education, so that's done completely for love. It's an honorary position but

it's chairing the major global fund that supports school education in developing countries. So, it's a cause very close to my heart, and I've taken on a series of other things connected with global education, being a person who from time to time, does things at the Brookings Institution in Washington, a think tank to try and further knowledge about how we best educate every child, and I've also become patron of the Campaign for Female Education. Then separately to that, here in Australia, I chair Beyond Blue.

Julia Gillard: I took that over from Jeff Kennett, and I am passionate about making sure that people feel prepared to talk about and act on their mental health, and that Australia's system of support is there when people need it. And then, I pitched this idea to King's College in London, what about we had a research institute that really bore down on the barriers to women becoming leaders, and they said yes, so I do that as well. And in addition, I've got a range of commercial boards that I'm on.

Sophie Thomas: That's a lot.

Julia Gillard: It's a lot.

Sophie Thomas: And so do you base yourself... You quite global now? Where do you live, Julia?

Julia Gillard: That should be a really easy question, shouldn't it? Where do you live? My home is in Adelaide, Australia, and I love my home. I went back after politics to Adelaide. So, having lived here in Melbourne for 30 odd years, went back because my family's there.

Julia Gillard: But what being in home at Adelaide means for me time wise, is realistically, half the year I travel overseas. My international commitments with the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, with the Global Partnership for Education, take me overseas about six months of the year.

Sophie Thomas: So, you are in some sense quite a global citizen and as the chair for the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, the word global I think is really important. In that role, I was wondering what do you think are the three biggest issues when it comes to women in leadership in 2020?

Julia Gillard: Number one, the inability still for women during their work-life journeys to find structures and supports to help them balance work and family life. So, I think for many women who start their careers very motivated, very wanting to get right to the top, there is a drift away in mid-career, and it's often at the time of family formation, and that's partly because workplaces don't give enough flexibilities, but it's partly because we continue to see unequal responses by men and women to making sure that childcare happens, and the housework happens, and that everything's okay on the home front. The statistics very clearly show that even for men and women who both work full time in comparable occupations, that women disproportionately do the work at home, and the caring for children, and elderly relatives.

Julia Gillard: Second, I'd say the continuation in all of our minds, none of us are immune to this, of sexist stereotypes and unconscious bias. So, when we close our eyes and are asked to imagine a leader in a whole lot of occupations, we still see very quickly in our mind's eye the image of a man in a suit. And then, I think there's an even more profound question beyond the stereotyping, and this would be number three, about how we value merit. I think a lot of the ways in which we say, "X is definitely the next person to deserve a promotion. X is the person of merit." When we start unpacking what is making us say those things, there's a lot of gendered assumptions about how to network, who stands out, who appears to have charisma, who can be in the office for long hours, which all tend to bias against women.

Sophie Thomas: How cognisant were you of the fact that you were going to be the first female Prime Minister in Australia, and do you think about that differently now than you did when you actually took on that role?

Julia Gillard: I wouldn't say I think about it differently now. I was certainly conscious when I was being sworn in by Quentin Bryce, the first woman to serve as Governor-General, that this was a moment in Australian history. And in some ways, the day was so fraught for me, so much to do, so much to think about, such a major day in my life, obviously an important day in the life of the nation when the prime ministership changes. To some extent, I hadn't had the time to sit back and reflect on being the first woman, but I kind of caught the excitement in Quentin's eyes that she was getting to be the one who was the Governor-General who swore in the first female Prime Minister, and that made a big impact on me. In the days that followed, I didn't think, given the "we've got our first woman" stuff was everywhere.

Julia Gillard: I didn't think I needed to go out and say, "Ah, guess what? Has anybody told you I'm the first woman to do this job?" It was just there. Looking back now, what I think I see more clearly, and it's partly because of the thinking and research I've done since, including working with the wonderful research team at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, is I can better cite my own individual experiences in the context of the body of research about how women leaders are seen and perceived. And for me, that's been intellectually fascinating, but in some ways also emotionally relieving because there was always a question in your mind, how much of this is me? How much of this is about gender? And looking at that research has helped me answer some of those questions to myself, for myself.

Sophie Thomas: In your resignation speech, you had that beautiful line that "Gender doesn't explain everything. It doesn't explain nothing. It explains some things," which I think really resonated with a lot of people at the time, and when you look at women in leadership positions today, do you think that that statement still holds true? How important do you think gender is to women in leadership today?

Julia Gillard: Oh, I still think it's very important and it's our perceptions, our evaluation of women leaders is still very influenced by gender, and it can be at the level of here's a group of cabinet ministers going about their business running the country, leading the nation, or here's a group of senior executives from a

major company who are making a big announcement about the future of that company, and we will still see coverage where what the women are wearing is focused on, when you see leaders interviewed you still see far more focus on family structures for women. The headlines will start, X woman, mother of two, or whatever, wherein a comparable circumstance if they were reporting on a man, they would not refer to how many children he has, right through to the unconscious biases that whisper in all of our brains that a woman leader is probably not very likable, not someone who is nurturing or empathetic. All of these things are still there. So, gender still matters, but every female leader's experience is a mix.

Julia Gillard: And one of the really difficult things about gender research is you almost never get to run the control test. You can't say to yourself, in these five years in politics in Australia, America, the UK, France, Germany, let's now do an academic study looking at those five years and say if every political circumstance was the same, but the leader was a man or the leader was a woman, what would their difference in treatment be? We can't get the pure. The only thing that's different is the gender because people govern at different times and there are different issues, and how much is about that? How much is about gender is always a question of judgment, so that's what makes it in some ways frustrating, but also intriguing to keep looking at and thinking about.

Sophie Thomas: When it comes to driving change, I'm wondering who do you think the responsibility lies with? Is it women's responsibility? Is it government's? Is it corporation's?

Julia Gillard: I think it's everybody's responsibility. It's men's responsibility too, and sometimes we leave the men out of the conversation, and we shouldn't. The way I think change predominantly happens is female activists with male supporters campaign for it, then governments and institutions respond. Everybody in that chain of thinking and campaigning needs to step up to the plate. So, women I think need to mobilize, women in powerful and decision-making positions need to use their power for change. But every word in that sentence applies to men as well. And that's, I think, fundamental in the sense that equality is a right that we should be extending to all and so we should all care about it. But it's also because a more gender-equal world will ultimately be a world that's better for men. If we live without stereotypes, if we live without gender prisons that we put people in, then men will have options and choices that are quite hard for them to make now.

Sophie Thomas: Yeah. That's something I've actually been thinking a lot about recently, is another thing we touched on with the Workplace Gender Equality Agency here in Australia, is how segregated industries still are here. So, education, for instance, is getting actually even worse when it comes to gender equality. And then, talking about the idea that there's this push to get women into male-dominated fields like STEM, which is really great, but there's no push in the reverse to get more men into female-dominated industries, like nursing or health care, which is obviously going to become even bigger of an industry than ever before in Australia. And I just do find that fascinating. And even with little girls, they're encouraged to take on

men's sports and that's all really, really great. But, that same idea of everything being an option isn't necessarily extended to little boys.

Julia Gillard: One of the things that my current lifestyle always brings me reminders of, is how boys and girls see the world. I get to spend time with my great-nephew Ethan, who's six years old and my great-niece Isla, who's four. And of course, our family, their mum and dad want them to grow up as... To become a man and a woman who see every option and every possibility, and that's what they're teaching them. And yet, they still pick up these very gendered cues. Ethan had a birthday party at one of those places where you play games, including some quite rough and tumble games. And when I asked Isla about Ethan's birthday party, what was it like? She said, "Oh, where they went, it's just for boys." And I looked, and then talked to my niece, her mother.

Julia Gillard: And it wasn't just for boys, it was for kids who had reached a certain height benchmark and Isla, because she's two years younger, was too short. But you think, where did she get that from? Because there's no way in the world that her mother or father said to her, "You can't come because it's just for boys." These cues, they're everywhere.

Sophie Thomas: It's insidious.

Julia Gillard: And they're sending messages, and the messages are that maths is the tough stuff and somehow male brains are better at it. But you're right. It's also sending the message that caring professions are women's work, that they're kind of the things that women are expected to do for free, and sometimes we end up paying women to do them. So, we've got to make sure that we're not sending any of those messages. And so, a girl can say to herself, "I want to be an astrophysicist," and a boy can say to himself, "I want to be a childcare worker," and no one raises any eyebrow about either of those choices.

Sophie Thomas: Do you think that since 2013, since you left parliament, that activism has kind of ramped up a little bit? I mean, do you agree with that? Do you see that there's more sort of a groundswell of feminist activism?

Julia Gillard: I certainly do. I absolutely do. And it makes me very optimistic because when we look at the history of the women's movement, we talk about the great waves of change, the first and the second wave of feminist change. I really think in the last few years we've felt another of those waves building, and discussion of gender is now much more common. It's much more common in boardrooms, in parliaments, around coffee tables and kitchen tables. I think people are focused on gender, so that gives me a lot of heart because we only change big things in our world by talking about them and getting the energy together for the change, specifically the #MeToo movement with it rocketing around the world.

Julia Gillard: I think it's both a driver and a symptom of that new underlying energy and activism, and it's also a great case study that social media, which can cause so many difficulties for women, particularly women who are in the public eye because it's such a toxic environment, that social media can actually be

a force for good too, and can connect women, and give them this different sense of how they can come together, and be campaigners for change. And here in Australia in the realm of politics, what I've certainly seen change is when I was Prime Minister, the sort of fashionable commentary in the media was that nothing about what was happening to me was happening because I was the first female Prime Minister, that gender was just irrelevant. And all these years later, we've now got a very lively debate about the treatment of women in politics, about what needs to change to equalize treatment. A lot of that debate has come out of the more conservative side of politics, but I think it's a generalized community conversation, and once again, the very fact we're talking about it is a foundation stone for further action.

Julia Gillard: The leader of the opposition says, "If it's true, Stavros, that men have more power, generally speaking, than women, is that a bad thing?" And then a discussion ensues, and another person being interviewed says, "I want my daughter to have as much opportunity as my son," to which the leader of the opposition says, "Yeah, I completely agree. But, what if men are by physiology or temperament more adapted to exercise authority or to issue command?"

Sophie Thomas: Do you think that you had to navigate power in a different way than all of the prime ministers previously to you, as the first female Prime Minister?

Julia Gillard: I wasn't conscious at the time of having to navigate power differently, other than as dictated by the political circumstances. But, having looked at the research since, I'm now more aware than I was then about how difficult it is for women to own power. And, I think a lot of people hearing that statement would then think it's because women lack confidence or they're shy of claiming a leadership role. They have to be mentored, encouraged. There's a whole lot of stuff that goes on, which if you wanted to put a label on it, the conferences, the seminars, the programs, the label you would put on it is we need to fix the women. The women need to be more assertive, even combative in claiming and owning power. I am not a fan of all of that. I actually think it's the structures and it's the biases that make it harder for women to claim power.

Julia Gillard: And lots of studies have actually shown that a man can show ambition, talk about ambition, say that he wants to be the leader of this or those CEO of that, and people will go, "Gee, he's a go-getter," and a woman who uses exactly the same terminology will be marked down, and it's because she's running against the stereotype we hold in our head of what women are supposed to be like, and so we... A man that looks strong and decisive is running with the stereotype. A woman who looks ambitious, strong, and decisive, we think, "Gee, she's not very empathetic. She's not very caring, she's not very nurturing, she's probably not very nice," and we mark her down for that. I'm more across that now than I felt at the time.

Sophie Thomas: I'm curious with your discussion with researchers at the center and the work that you do, is there anything that's really surprised you when it comes to learning more about gender equality? Also, I'm curious to know if there's

any areas where you've identified that maybe we've actually reversed rather than progressed?

Julia Gillard: One thing that surprised and disappointed me was actually revealed by a wonderful Australian researcher, but we've published her work at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership as well, researcher called Blair Williams at the Australian National University, who did a comparison of the newspaper reporting in the two weeks after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the UK way back in 1979, and the two weeks after Theresa May became Prime Minister, only to find that the reporting is more gendered now. Yeah. Yikes. That's completely counterintuitive to what you would think, but when you stand back and think about what's happened in the media since, in some ways, unsurprising. You've got to look at the second level. It's not the same traditional newspapers with the inherent politeness towards political leaders that one saw in 1979. Now, newspapers will go far more shock horror to try and shift newspapers off the shelves and into people's hands.

Julia Gillard: I mean, this is an industry with profound challenges to its economic models. So, they've got to keep selling those newspapers. And the outworking of that is that they're much more likely to focus on appearance and other issues for women. So, we've gone backwards in that regard. That did surprise me.

Sophie Thomas: That's grim. Do you think that there's any particular groups of women that maybe we forget about when we talk about gender equality? So, for instance, indigenous women, or LGBT women, or even disabled women.

Julia Gillard: I don't think we forget, but when we talk about women's experiences, we do have to be very sensitive to what the theorists would refer to as intersectionality, which really means the fact that disadvantage and prejudices can compound. And so, there's lots of real-world research on all of that. Once again, to cite a UK example, it's just on my mind following some of the commentary in the UK around the election late last year in social media reporting. One of the things that was very, very clear from that election and the election before, was that women parliamentarians were disproportionately the target of abuse, but women who were of a different racial group, so, for example, Diane Abbott of the British Labor Party, she's the first black woman to have ever been elected into the House of Commons, the stuff she gets is off the scale. So, it's just one reminder that sexism, racism, other sorts of prejudices compound and combine, and that is the lived experience of a whole lot of women, and we need to be bringing that to the table when we're thinking about feminism and hearing those voices, too.

Sophie Thomas: In the Western world, we're very focused on the idea of getting more women on boards, or into CEO positions, or in leadership positions. But then, in often in developing countries, there are women who are fighting to have an education or even get to work at all. And I'm wondering if you have any... I know there's no silver bullet solution, but for any women in the Western world who are interested in engaging, in helping women in

developing countries, if you have an approach when it comes to addressing these global issues.

Julia Gillard: Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about this. And one of the reasons I've been thinking a lot about it is I've been working on a book, locked away working on a book manuscript, a book I'm co-authoring with an African woman called Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and we are working on a book about women and leadership and taking this truly global perspective. And we have asked ourselves the question, what's the difference between talking about these issues in Australia where, of course, I'm from, and Nigeria where Ngozi is from. And what we found is yes, of course, there are differences in societal issues, in poverty levels, in levels of disadvantage. There's still the huge struggle in Nigeria for girls to go to school. That's not something that we need to confront in Australia. But, when you talk to women who have held leadership positions in very different environments, there's a lot of commonality in their experiences, too.

Julia Gillard: So, the first thing I'd say is, let's not let the cultures and contexts we come from divide us. We've got to bring an understanding of them together. But, we should be united as women not divided, based on that. And, I also think for women from Australia, from parts of the world that are far more advantaged, there are lots of ways of helping, whether it's donating to an organization like the Campaign for Female Education that is making sure that girls in Africa can complete their secondary schooling, and then go on successfully into work, and then give back to the next generation of girls. You can raise your voice within Australia to make sure that the Australian government increases the amount of overseas development aid that it is spending generally, but spending particularly, on things like female empowerment and girls education.

Julia Gillard: Many people work in businesses that are truly global businesses, and the practices of those businesses in emerging economies and developing countries matter too. Are the global businesses providing the same benefits and opportunities to women in those markets that they provide here to women in Australia? Being an activist around those things can make a profound difference.

Sophie Thomas: When it comes to activism, one thing that people talk about, that there has been this sort of increase in feminist activism over the past five years or so, is the idea of a backlash and the idea of people even saying that we're sick of talking about diversity. What's your response to this backlash?

Julia Gillard: I think it's real, and I think we're seeing it in politics in many parts of the world, a very strong backlash. And I think we see it on social media, where the misogyny and threats of violence and vileness that greets women who step out into the public square, particularly around feminist issues, is just truly horrifying. So, it's definitely there. I, in some ways, think it's inherent in any struggle for change, that there's a action and reaction and that is the way in which our societies digest big agendas, big needs for change, and then we come out the other end, and by the time the change has happened, we then look back at that history and say, "What was that all about?"

Julia Gillard: From this very comfortable remove, I think we look back at the struggle that women had to get the vote. And we just... I mean it's almost beyond imagination, isn't it, that anybody could have stood in public places and said, "Women shouldn't be able to vote because they're too emotional, too hysterical. They'll only vote the way their husbands tell them to anyway." But, you look back at the parliamentary record and all of these things were said, and women went to jail, and hunger strikes to get the right to vote. And yet now, no one would even turn their mind to it on an election day that they're accused of people waiting to vote, men and women. So, I think that should give us a sense of overall optimism, that the action and reaction is the way we work our way through the change. And then the change comes.

Sophie Thomas: Thank you to our guest, Julia Gillard. One thing we didn't cover in our conversation is the one job we have in common, podcast hosting. Julia hosts a show called A Podcast of One's Own, where she interviews well-known leaders on the lessons they've learned over their lives and careers. You can find it on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, where you'll also be able to listen to more episodes of Women are the Business, including our recent episode on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and workplaces. For more insights on how women work and live, head to our website, fbe.unimelb.edu.au/womenarethebusiness.

Sophie Thomas: Women are the Business is recorded on Wurundjeri land at the University of Melbourne. The podcast is produced by Seth Robinson, James Whitmore, and me, Sophie Thomas. This episode was recorded by Silvi Vann-Wall and mixed by Audiocraft's Camilla Hannan. The theme music comes from Epidemic South.