

Discrimination and Inequity: Transcript for Translation

Commissioner Ward: Welcome to Level the Playing Field where we explore topics related to economics equity women work and money. My name is Kadie Ward and I'm Commissioner and CEO of Ontario's Pay Equity Commission. Today we're talking with Dr. Debora Spar. Dr. Spar is the Jaime and Josefina Chua Tiampo professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School, and Senior Associate Dean for Business and Global Society. Her research focuses on issues of gender and technology, as well as the interplay between technological change and broader social structures. Professor Spar tackles some of these issues in her most recent book *Work Mate Marry Love: How Machines Shape our Human Destiny*. Dr. Spar thank you for sharing time with me to talk about your research.

Dr. Spar: Oh, it's a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Commissioner Ward: So for readers who appreciated work like Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* or Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*, you will thoroughly enjoy Dr. Spar's *Work Mate Marry Love* as it adds an element that is conspicuously missing in broad researching sociological research, which is gender, and how it is constructed and transformed through sociological and technological change. So, Dr. Spar thank you for that addition to the academic and popular discourse. And you know you note in *Work Mate Marry Love* that it's not intuitively obvious, the distinction between gender roles would arise or change as the result of technology, but you make a really compelling case for it, and for it starting with the invention of the plow. When you say, and this is a great quote, patriarchy has its roots in the Neolithic Revolution. So, what were the broad implications of this period, and the creation of the plow and how does that era shape and bias gender roles?

Dr. Spar: Well, it's, you know, the plow was created now so long ago that we can't even really think about it as a technology. But, as I argue and many people have argued this previously the plow and more broadly, the development of agriculture was probably the single most important technological revolution that humankind has gone through, maybe on the verge of another one, but it all started with the plow because it was the plow that enabled our ancestors to move from being hunters and gatherers, which was the way we organized ourselves for hundreds and thousands of years to leave that life and become farmers instead. And that was really the first shift that put us as a species, you know, on the road to modernity. And so, a number of people have looked at that shift and have noted the way the plow enabled things like villages and wars and governments kind of everything we know about modern society started with a shift to agriculture. But what I add into the mix is how this technological change changed gender roles and family structures, equally dramatically and to put a lot of complicated you know history into bumper sticker really the most interesting development was that it

was the plow that created what we now think of as monogamous marriage. Prior to the creation of the plow and agriculture we lived as tribes we lived as nomads there were no nuclear families that you know the way we think of them out now is normal in fact they're quite recent in historical time, and they all came out of the development of agriculture.

Commissioner Ward: That's unbelievable. I mean how is that related to, well, I'll frame the question this way, you're talking about how before the agricultural revolution being tribal and nomadic and you know hunter gatherers finding and scavenging from the land. And you mentioned in your book that women's economic contribution to their nomadic communities was about 50%, meaning women provided half the calories that their community needed through various activities. So, you know, what was the consequence of the plow sort of reshaping these relationships into monogamy with men and women. And in some ways, sort of, in the book you talk a little bit about how they were pushed out of that economic production process and started to serve a much different role in their local economies.

Dr. Spar: Yeah no, that's right. So, from what we know from the anthropological research in hunting gathering societies, as you said, women produced roughly 50% of the calories. Maybe they weren't as involved in the big game hunting, but they were the ones who found that the shellfish and the proverbial nuts and berries so were because finding food was the dominant economic use of time. They were equal producers in economic terms to men. Then when the shift to agriculture happens, and this is complicated, but I'll go through some of the major points. What happens then this is quite Marxist is that private property is developed, when you're living in a hunting gathering society, there's no stuff. There's no private property people may own a basic axe a basic, basic basket but that's it, because you have to carry all of your possessions with you once you move to agriculture private property becomes crucial for reasons that are pretty obvious. You need land. Once you invest in land and you spend months cultivating and growing and watering and tending, you want to own that land. So, our ancestors our farming ancestors developed private property and crucially they developed a need for labor. Because once you become a farmer, you need labor to tend to fields and sow the fields and do all that work. And back in you know 6000 B.C. the only way to get labor was either by stealing it, which is why tragically slavery evolves at this moment in time, or by producing more labor, through childbirth and so and this is the great sort of irony of history in gender terms, you would think that as the demand for children goes up that women would become more valuable because they are of course the ones who produce the children, but in fact the reverse happens in pretty much every society we have a record of because women became valuable for their reproductive potential. They stepped out of the economic workforce, and they basically stayed home and made babies. And that's, that's an exaggeration but it captures the brunt of what happened. And so you see and now we're reaching a period

of time where there are historical records you see the adoration of the woman as a child bearer, and what these, you know civilization initially was these very small villages, always in danger. What the men of the village had to do is to protect the women, so that they could they could not be stolen, and that they could produce baby after baby after baby so women's fertility shoots up during this time they produce more and more babies, they step out of the labor force and as a result of that transition women's power, if you will, diminishes, and you see this, this last thing I'll say on the point, you see this when you look at the marriage ceremonies that came out of this period. And in many ways, we still have echoes of it in the traditional marriage ceremonies today, just think of the words, a young woman is given away by her husband. She is given to another man she pledges to be loyal to him faithful to him for the rest of her life and she pledges to be bountiful.

Commissioner Ward: Right.

Dr. Spar: Is what, and I always apologize about, you know, very happily married myself but this is what marriage is about.

Commissioner Ward: Right.

Dr. Spar: A real estate transaction to ensure the production of children.

Commissioner Ward: I love the way that your research in the book expands on this and frames this as sort of the creation of, as you said, monogamy and then family to protect property and to create growth but somehow you know the value of women's role in that is diminished from economic production to just reproduction. So, the book for people who want to know more can dive into that argument. You know we're going to move ahead a few centuries and I love that something you said in another interview I saw. You said I speak I think in 8000-year chunks. Pardon me, which is a really wonderful way to think because it helps us understand society so much better but. So, let's move ahead a few centuries, out of, out of the Neolithic period, because you make a similar argument about the Industrial Revolution and this is a great quote from your book you say before the Industrial Revolution a woman's place was in the home, but so was everyone else's. And you know how did the technology of the Industrial Revolution make an even greater distinction between what we consider men's work and women's work and how is that work valued differently?

Dr. Spar: Well let me step back just a second, just to go over what you just mentioned. So, after we get through the agricultural revolution which took thousands of years to unravel the dominant economic unit was kind of the extended family, and pretty much everyone was farmers with the exception of, you know some aristocrats and soldiers and everyone really worked on the family farm. And, and it wasn't just the nuclear family because there were unmarried siblings and in laws and sort of adopted children. And,

and the distinction between men's labor and women's labor. Wasn't that clear for sure there were distinctions and women had the primary child raising role, but raising children was different because most of them didn't survive to adulthood and there wasn't this sort of emotional investment in one's children the way we think of it today. And so, the farm tasks were sort of shared. You know, sometimes the woman was taking care of the chickens and the men had the cows and sometimes it was reversed and sometimes a kid was sent out. So, you didn't have these very distinct gender roles and for sure everybody worked at home. Now fast forward to the Industrial Revolution when once again kind of everything we know about the world turns topsy turvy in a much faster period of time now. And the most important thing that the Industrial Revolution did was to create factories. And this is what Marx and you know sort of all the leading minds of this era were fixated on was the growth of the factory economy and factories also and I would include things like mines and railways and all the machines that we created at that time. And think about just to the most basic level what happens when you create a factory. What happens when you create a factory is that somebody has to leave the home and work in the factory. And interestingly in the early days of the Industrial Revolution, it was mostly women and children who worked in the factories, but as the factories themselves became more physically complicated, and as men realized that the better jobs were in the factories, men became the dominant factory labor force and women stayed home, and we can track this I mean this is, you know, this happened you know a couple hundred years ago, and what you get is the development of a paid labor force. Those who leave the home and work for wage labor, and an unpaid labor force. Those who stay at home and tend to the children and the hearth and the husband. And what I find so fascinating about this is that you can see how the culture shifted accordingly. So up until the Industrial Revolution, there was no such thing as a housewife, you know the term just doesn't exist, but as the Industrial Revolution plays out and as children become healthier and, and, and people have a little bit more time on their hands, you start to get the creation of the myth of the housewife. In Germany, it's Die Hausfrau in in in England, it's the little woman the Victorian goddess, and a woman's role increasingly is defined as she who takes care of the children.

Commissioner Ward: Right.

Dr. Spar: And educates them to become citizens and a man's role, because we often forget sort of the male identity, here men's identity becomes deeply pinned to being the breadwinner, right, which I think is crucial, not only for what it says about gender differences but I think it's increasingly we're feeling the, the echoes of that now, because as men start losing these factory jobs, they're also losing what has been their identity for hundreds of years.

Commissioner Ward: That is a really exceptional point when we talk about gender, because we talk so much about the creation of women and women's identity or in the

book when you talk with the Industrial Revolution you say okay, factories, rather than favoring you know dexterity and gentleness, they started to favor strength and that moved women and children out of, you know, children human rights all these other things but that was part of society different society different morality. But at the same time, ideas of male and men's contributions the economy were being designed just, just as well. I wonder on this point you don't talk too much about it in your book but I wonder if you've given thought to, you know, also in this period, women and the construction of the housewife happened. For some women but we know that women of color were enslaved and exploited in this sort of economic process instead of being pushed out. Have you looked at also any of the racialized dimensions of that for women because we know now it's a very different experience for how women were engaged in all these processes depending on you know even gender identities, but also racialized identity.

Dr. Spar: You know that's exactly right and what I think is so important to bear in mind here is that sort of what the culture describes is not necessarily what, what is happening across the culture. Look at Victorian England which is sort of the epitome of this moment. Most women. In fact, we're not full-time wives and mothers, a huge number of women particularly women of color, Irish women you know other colonial women in the British Empire they were the servants in the household. They were the ones doing the laundry. They were the ones still working in some of the lower factory jobs, but the culture, creates this, this idea that the ideal woman stays at home and just sort of worries about her children and tends to their well being. So, the majority of women, even white women, we're not living that reality. But that's what was sort of put forth as the ideal, and we actually see some interesting overtones both in Canada and in the United States in the 1950s when you get bizarrely sort this ideal that is white woman who was the perfect wife and mother. Whereas, you know, women of color were working throughout this period. You know immigrant women were working throughout this period but they sort of get lost in in the history, and they too were sort of told through the culture that what they should be aspiring to is not to be an economic producer anymore.

Commissioner Ward: Wow. Yeah.

Dr. Spar: To be a stay at home wife that became the cultural ideal.

Commissioner Ward: Yeah. Regardless, that was a thread pulling through, you know, a sort of common thread for all for all women. So, you've already said this, you know, technology you argued created the housewife, and technology than later facilitated feminism. Can you tell us more about these technological changes and how social progress or change whatever qualifier you want to give it is associated with these technologies?

Dr. Spar: Yeah, I mean one of the things I'm really trying to do in the book and perhaps the central argument is to argue that a lot of the things that we think of as socially driven or culturally driven or accidentally driven are in fact driven by technology.

Commissioner Ward: Right.

Dr. Spar: And, and I don't want to be a complete technological determinist, but I think I've become pretty close, which and you know they are going to make that argument because I want to be able to predict into the future. And if I can show how technology shifts even such intimate things as gender and marital and sexual relations then watch out when the robots come right because it's going to shift everything in even more dramatic ways. And when I talked about, I spent 10 years as the President of Barnard College, which is a deeply feminist college and so of course I'm in awe of the great feminist leaders who fought for women's rights. But what enabled a lot of those rights to have meaning was in fact technology. And, and, in particular, I said one of my goals in the book is to give the lowly toaster, its place in history. And I only mean that half facetiously because we tend not to think of household appliances as technologies, we tend to think of cars and trains and machines as technology, but the washing machine is one of the most important technologies in the history of the 20th century the toaster admittedly not so much but the washing machine is a really big deal because prior to the advent of the washing machine, which I don't know your family background but in your grandmother or great grandmothers recent history, doing the laundry took 20 hours a week.

Commissioner Ward: Yeah.

Dr. Spar: Messy dirty dangerous, physical work, the water had to be boiled, lye had to be created, these heavy clothes had to be dragged. So, even the most ambitious woman who desperately wanted to go into the workforce, unless she had enough money to pay a laundress to come do her laundry, she was doing laundry 20 hours a week. So, all of us who complain you know about throwing the socks in the washing machine. It really just doesn't take that long. So, it was when you got the washing machine, and the refrigerator, that you created literally just time in a woman's week to go into the workforce. And then of course, probably the most important technology in terms of women's liberation is contraception. Prior to the advent of reliable contraception which really isn't until the pill in 1973. Super recently, you know, a woman was totally at the whim, not only of the men in her life but probably more importantly Mother Nature, and the babies came when the babies came and there wasn't that much you could do to change that. The pill combined with reliable access to safe abortion gave women for the first time in history control over their reproductive destinies. And it was really that combination of help in the household through technology and control over reproduction, that enabled the women of my generation, I was really the first

generation to take full advantage of both of those technologies that made it possible for us to even imagine being, you know, working for the working for the provincial government being a professor, just wasn't possible for women before that point with the exception of a tiny tiny handful of Superwoman.

Commissioner Ward: Yeah, it's it's interesting at that moment, it was only partway through the book I think you're talking about this, but part of the story comes full circle when you know women's, even though their value in the Neolithic period was the reproductive function they're devalued forced into the home, and you know, thousands of years later, we now get the choice of how we want to engage in the economy and not, you know, not to be too dramatic but sort of you know tied to our biological functions and organs

Dr. Spar: So you're seeing it and just real briefly because this isn't even in the book because it's so it's so recent, but birth rates are plummeting because it turns out and a lot of this is the pandemic but the trends predate the pandemic. Once women are given these options it's choosing that most of them are choosing to have fewer children than has ever been the case before.

Commissioner Ward: Right. And so, it's it's indicating, you know, women's self actualization and the path that we're choosing for ourselves. You just mentioned, the pandemic so I'm going to follow up with a question on that because we've seen how the global pandemic impacted women in a myriad of ways. And yet you know it also in your book that women have been more inclined to adapt to employment challenges and post industrial economies, and in your book you state that the jobs of the future are going to women, while their male counterparts in seeming contradiction to their own self interest cling to the remnants of the economy of the past. So, what does the future of work, look like for women and, and you know how has more recent or modern technology impacted potentially the way we value women's contribution in the labor market, and at home?

Dr. Spar: So there's like three things happening simultaneously right now and my crystal ball isn't quite good enough to see where they're all going to going to fall out but at a minimum, I think what we've seen over the past 20 years is a sharp decline in the jobs that have historically been held by men. And these are the industrial era jobs. So the factory jobs. Driving, train conducting, all of these jobs have predominantly been held by men, and these are the jobs that are going away. And, for sure the pandemic is going to accelerate that shift the industry that I always mentioned is meat packing. You know meatpacking is not a wonderful job to have it's hard it's smelly it's complicated and it turns out during the pandemic that having human beings in meatpacking plants is a risk. And so, I fully suspect that the next time somebody builds a meatpacking plant, it's going to be fully automated. And so, we are dealing in across the industrialized world

with what I think is an under examined crisis which is the crisis of male unemployment. And at the fringes it devolves into what are you know commonly referred to as the incels, because the other, the other thing that's going on right now is as changes in dating and sexual patterns are shifting men who are not deemed attractive, which in many cases means men who are not deemed to be good breadwinners and again this goes back to these norms that were established during the Industrial Revolution. Not only are they not getting jobs they're also not getting married, and they're not having access to sex, which seems like a sort of trivial thing to talk about but it's not. And at the fringes these men are becoming violent. And, you know, aside from the fringes they're, they're becoming a political risk and, and I believe I can't prove this, but the work that that's been done under over what's called depths of despair. We're seeing rates of suicide, opioid addiction, alcoholism soar and they're soaring particularly among this group of men who don't have economic prospects, so that that's one very important and scary trend. The more positive piece for women is that women who have sort of been thrown out of the industrialized economy because there are of course are women who also have these jobs have been more flexible, so they're going back and they're training as a home health assistants, teaching assistants, you know, various forms of the sort of hands on helping professions. So, when I wrote the book I was actually very worried about the future of men more optimistic about the future of women and the pandemic has, has thrown another real curveball into that, because as you mentioned, the vast majority of jobs that have been lost during the pandemic are now women's jobs. Retail, hoteling, and those jobs well they're coming back but we're also seeing women disproportionately dropping out of the workforce, largely because what has not changed since the Neolithic Revolution, is that women are the primary caregivers. And so, everyone's seen this on Zoom screens for women and men but primarily for women that you know a woman is trying to do this work on Zoom and there's a toddler coming in and there's a baby screaming and there's a cat that needs attention. And so women, facing this reality have been dropping out of the workforce, the optimist in me, says that, I think we're going to figure out how to come out of the pandemic with a hybrid model certainly corporations are feeling the pressure right now to come up with three day work workplaces, flexible workplaces, hybrid workplaces. I don't want to be overly optimistic about that, but I do think a big part of that is going to happen and this actually could turn out to be quite, quite good because people can continue to do what you and I are doing right now, and a fair amount of our work sitting at home so you know I don't have children at home anymore but if I did, I could run down when the interview is over and, and tend to them and so we could wind up with a more flexible workplace, although with the major caveat we're talking about the elite jobs here.

Commissioner Ward: Yeah.

Dr. Spar: About people like the two of us and I suspect most many people who are listening you can't do this if you're waitressing, you can't do this, if you're cleaning houses. So, we really have a moment of reflection, where we can get this right. But I think the broader term the I'm sorry the longer term trend we're seeing is that there are going to be fewer jobs available, and there's particularly going to be fewer jobs available at sort of what used to be working in middle class, pay levels.

Commissioner Ward: Yeah, very broad shifts in the labor force are happening as you pointed out and in inequitably for men and women, and I think that's the key takeaway that you know yes women are faring, could fare well, but it might also be at the detriment of men. Because of manufacturing going away for instance, which is typically held by men, or because women are clustered in care economies like nursing or personal support workers or education these jobs continue because we need that level of personal interaction you know you can't not yet, replace it with machines so, so it you know we work in the Ministry of Labor so we are constantly watching these shifts in the labor market and thinking about policy ways and tools, we can create as legislators to respond to this but you can't always legislate, this is the free market you can't legislate and control those decisions. You know I really want to thank you for the great research that you've done and for your writing, not just in this book but your other book Wonder Woman was fantastic as well. And you know your work that helps us understand how humankind has been shaped by technological change and social response. And as we've been talking about your most recent book Work Mate Marry Love really gives insight on the impact of technology and gender, and the value of women's work on gender and gender constructs and how social, you know how changing social responses to technology may actually help us evolve past constructed norms and into some form of equity. So, I think that's a very you know wonderful message that you've given us through your work.

Dr. Spar: Well thank you and I do think, um, you know, it's funny in a book that that covers this much history and touches on so many really painful episodes, it winds up being a quite optimistic book, I do think we have the ability to shape the future in a much more equitable mindful way, we just need to get people like, like you and those who you work with. We need to get working on it quickly because the future is coming at us awfully fast right now.

Commissioner Ward: Exactly. Thank you. This conversation is part of a series published by the Pay Equity Commission of Ontario to examine economics equity women work and money. You can learn more at levelthepayingfield.ca, and please share this video on your social platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, so we can elevate the equity conversation.