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Authors(s)	Barry, Ursula
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Feminist Reflections on Basic Income

Feminist economics, which grew in influence from the mid-1980s, encompassed a strong critique of the assumptions underlying the welfare state developments in Western Europe. It was argued that the link between paid employment and welfare entitlements, which was a fundamental element of most welfare states, reflected a perspective that showed a complete lack of recognition of the fluidity of women's economic activities. This lack of recognition that women's economic lives are likely to be shaped by a spectrum of economic activity which includes: paid employment - home-based carer - part-time employment - underemployment - unpaid work. Such a fluid economic picture fell largely outside the male-oriented binary image of employment: unemployment that underlay the thinking shaping western welfare states.

The lack of recognition of unpaid work which has characterised mainstream economic thinking, was the focus of Marilyn Waring's groundbreaking text 'Counting for Nothing - what men value and what women are worth' (1988), which revealed the essential flaw of traditional gendered economic thinking. At the heart of such thinking is the undervaluing of care and care labour - largely carried out by women - and the structural economic disadvantages experienced by women as a consequence. Essentially the male-worker/earner breadwinner model which rendered the majority of women as dependents within the welfare state (and in relation to family income) was the dominant patriarchal welfare model - a model that penalised women for carrying the majority of care responsibilities. Linked to such gendered economic perspectives is a fundamental inequality in the sharing of unpaid work that has persisted up to the present day at a global level. The only exceptions to this have been in the Nordic countries where the significant majority of women entered the paid employment economy and built up welfare entitlements closely on a par with men.

A consequence of this evolution of welfare states and the rigid nature of the formal economy has been the development of a whole series of regulations in the Irish and other welfare states that impose a complex and impenetrable gendered web of welfare entitlements: different levels of payments to different claimants; restrictive access to labour market and training programmes; a hierarchy of child support payment rates; severe gender inequality in pension entitlements; differential withdrawal of related benefits, for example rent supports and medical cards. Predominantly women welfare claimants are, as a result, involved in a complex set of negotiations and visits to multiple offices, waiting in endless humiliating queues to access benefits while at the same time managing care demands of low-income households.

Feminist Discourses on the Benefits of Basic Income?

One of the hugely beneficial effects of a basic income system would be that the unwieldy, ad-hoc evolution of gendered welfare states with their systems of inclusion and exclusion, of entitlement and non-entitlement could be dismantled and replaced by a basic income entitlement to all adults and without any restrictions of access to paid employment subject to policing under current

systems. As Katada (2011) has argued basic income is recognised as a “payment for household and care labour.....however, perspectives on the impact basic income has on the gender division of roles and on the labor market differ”. On the one hand is an argument that rigid gender division of labour may be reinforced under a system of basic income or alternatively a counter argument is that those rigid gender roles may be challenged by the workings of a basic income model in practice. As basic income ensures that income is *unconditionally* paid to all citizens as an *individual right*, it may be argued that it would alleviate unequal distribution of income within the household and secondly, because there are no eligibility criteria other than age, a rights-based approach treating women and men equally would be put in place.

Unconditionality in this case means that eligibility would not be based on employment status, employment record, willingness to work or marital status and there would be no requirement to take a means test, work test or behavior test in order to establish eligibility. This is likely to favour women who have found themselves excluded from active labour marker programmes, pensions and a range of benefits, because of an interrupted paid work history. In this context, one perspective within feminism asserts that basic income is a way of reevaluating the economic value of the (paid and unpaid) work women have primarily been responsible for in the past, while also *promoting the economic independence of women*. A second perspective holds that a basic income model would return women to the home, and contribute to a backlash that runs *counter to women’s liberation and independence*.

So, a key question from a feminist perspective is whether basic income promotes women’s economic independence? Feminists have traditionally asserted that individualised welfare and other entitlements are indispensable to the exercise of women’s socio-political rights and it may be argued that a basic income model supports that. By establishing women’s autonomous guaranteed income, a basic income model breaks the tying of entitlements to paid wage labour. But from another perspective the question is whether basic income would mean a permanent low income for many women in which gender inequalities may be reinforced or even exacerbated?

Some feminists have viewed basic income from a definite negative perspective. It is argued by some that firstly, by recognising the value of household and care labor and secondly, providing economic compensation for it, a basic income would be in danger of silencing women and locking them into the private space of the home, thereby maintaining and strengthening rigid unequal gender division of roles and labour. Feminists opposing basic income most often base their arguments on this kind of scenario (Orloff 1999; Robeyns 2000). From this different perspective, recognising household and care labor as an activity with socially beneficial value – as opposed to the payment for it – is essential for a feminist process of social change. It is argued that under this approach, it then becomes feasible that free and universal household and care services can become core public services providing high quality care and consequently the development of more equal gender roles.

Basic Income together with Equality Policy Measures

Dominant thinking within feminism is that basic income needs to be introduced *alongside other policies* that address and effectively challenge gender inequality in the division of labor, and more widely in the political-cultural systems (Lister 1997; Robeyns 2000; Elgarte 2008; Baker 2008; McKay 2005; Pateman 2006). Feminists have highlighted the following concrete policies that need to be introduced together with basic income which encompass the following kind of changes:

- work sharing or reduction of labor time for all people
- gender equality of outcome on the labor market
- substantial maternity and paternity leave
- periodic or continuous leave for fulltime care labor
- affordable high quality care services
- equal gender representation in decision-making
- changes in the culture and norms of the labor market
- effective policies addressing gender-based violence
- cultural shift away from sexual objectification of women

(Zelleke 2008; McKay 2005; Pateman 2006; Robeyns 2000; Parker 1993).

Baker (2008) states that the important issue concerning the gender division of labor is the dominant ideology relating to gender, in which care labor continues to be considered to be the women's 'natural' role. In order to effectively challenge that ideology, in his view, a *cultural change* that makes care labour equal between men and women is needed. Baker's viewpoint is that men are currently penalised by their lack of access to care activity and women are also penalised by the expectation that they will carry the majority of care responsibilities. Zelleke adopts a similar approach arguing that the focus of the discussion on whether or not basic income itself will promote the dissolution of the gender division of labor is an inadequate starting point. Instead, she argues that basic income should be seen in her view as one critical element in promoting gender equality by seeking the socio-economic conditions necessary to bring about the dissolution of the gender division of labor (Zelleke 2008).

Citizenship, Democracy, Basic Income and Feminism

Pateman's (2006) work brings feminism together with political theory in relation to citizenship and democracy and she argues a *guaranteed basic income*. As a citizens' right. In her view a basic income is part of a process of social change based on a just society eliminating social institutions and practices that produce *relationships of domination and oppression*. Basic income, she argues, as an unconditional social transfer that assures all citizens a subsistence income, is a way to counter the subordination that stems from the capitalist organisation of production and the differential *access to political power generated by economic inequality*. In Pateman's view, basic income is a core entitlement of citizenship, fundamental to the democratic commitment to making some form of political participation available to all – in her thinking conceptions of social justice falter if they do not consider how redistributive schemes affect political participation. Pateman's justification for basic income therefore depends on the opportunities it creates for people to exercise their *autonomy, give meaningful consent, and engage in participatory democratic activities*. Pateman further argues that the

division of the two perspectives of feminism on the relationship between basic income and the gender division of labor are “matters of level”. In her view, if the level at which basic income is set is too low, it is likely to result in the maintenance of status quo or even the strengthening of the gender division of labor. On the other hand, a relatively high level of basic income, she argues, could have a transformational function. Pateman herself offers “a level sufficient for a modest but decent standard of life” as the appropriate level to establish basic income (Pateman 2006).

Conclusion

Basic income in itself may not be able to challenge the gender division of labour, however it can bring about one critical condition necessary for the realisation of that gender justice objective. That is, an increased level of economic independence for many women and an end to the gendered discriminatory nature of current welfare systems - of which Ireland is a prime example. In combination with key cultural changes that challenge traditional rigid gender roles, effective policies and practices to achieve a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work, including a valuing of care work, are needed. Alongside a move towards a basic income model, legislation, policies and practices as well as a shift in dominant ideologies are more likely to achieve greater gender equality in economic activity at every level.

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