

BASIC INCOME STUDIES
An International Journal of Basic Income Research

Vol. 3, Issue 3

COMMENT

December 2008

Debate: "Should Feminists Endorse Basic Income?"
Guest editor: Ingrid Robeyns, Radboud University Nijmegen

Institutionalizing the Universal Caretaker Through a Basic Income?*

Almaz Zelleke
The New School

Abstract – Feminists should endorse a basic income, particularly in comparison to other feasible safety net alternatives, including work-conditioned benefits and a caregiver stipend. A basic income promotes gender equality by creating the social and economic conditions required to reduce the gendered division of labor. Most importantly, a universal, unconditional basic income could greatly reduce the poverty rate of the most vulnerable group in capitalist economies: single women and their children. For this reason if for no other, feminists should endorse a basic income.

Keywords – basic income, care work, guaranteed minimum income, gender equality, feminism

Should feminists endorse a basic income? The answer depends on whether we believe that a basic income would promote gender equality, or hinder it, compared to other feasible safety net or redistributive schemes. This depends on how we conceive of gender equality. Does gender equality require men and

* I am grateful for the comments of Ingrid Robeyns, Jurgen De Wispelaere, and the participants and audience at the roundtable discussion "Should Feminists Endorse a Basic Income?" at the Basic Income Earth Network Congress, Dublin, Ireland, June 2008.

women to have the same opportunities for political and economic influence, income, paid employment, and leisure, or the same outcomes? Does gender equality require abolishing gender difference, or recognizing it? My premise in this essay is that the first step to achieving gender equality is to reduce the gendered distribution of labor, and my conclusion is that a basic income does this better than any other feasible safety net or redistributive scheme.

The structure of the social safety net in a nation is founded on a conception of citizenship that gives individuals standing to claim benefits. In democratic nations with capitalist economies, the most generous benefits go to citizens conceived as workers. Currently, the dominant feminist critiques of the status quo accept this norm of productive citizenship (see, e.g., Bergmann, 1998) and seek to enhance gender equality by providing women who work full-time with affordable dependent care services (Bergmann, 2000, 2006), or by arguing that care work should be recognized and compensated as work with a *caregiver income* (Kittay, 1999, Abelda et al 2004, Beem 2005). As noted by Nancy Fraser, this leads to the dominance in policy debates of two models of citizenship, which she terms the *universal breadwinner* and *caregiver parity* models (1997).

The universal breadwinner model “aims to achieve gender equity principally by promoting women’s employment”(Fraser, 1997, p. 51) and requires support services designed to free women from caregiving responsibilities that hinder their full-time work. It accepts uncritically not only the notion of “separate spheres,” but also the primacy of the public sphere for individual empowerment and flourishing, and as the primary site of gender equality. It views caregiving and other domestic work as problems to be solved through commodification—through increased availability of child and elder care, housecleaning, and meal preparation services.

The caregiver parity model “aims to promote gender equity principally by supporting informal care work” (Fraser, 1997, p. 55) and requires that care work be regarded and remunerated on a par with other paid employment. This model does not view the gendered distribution of labor as problematic, only the income inequality and lack of respect for care work it fosters. Compensation for caregiving is thought to be enough to raise its social and material status, allowing men and women to achieve equality despite the choice of different ends.

Fraser critiques both these models for their *androcentrism*. Androcentrism holds when men’s dominant life patterns are taken to represent the norm for all, and women’s recognition and income security depend on their conformity to those norms. Neither the universal breadwinner model nor the caregiver parity model fundamentally challenges the assumption of an autonomous, independent

worker as the model citizen. The universal breadwinner model attempts to provide sufficient supports for women to participate in paid employment in equal numbers to men; the caregiver parity model seeks to recast unpaid caregiving in the mold of autonomous, independent work. Neither model recognizes that caregiving and household responsibilities cannot be fully commodified or restricted to the confines of employment-comparable hours and tasks (Mink, 1995); as a result, both models are only marginal improvements on the status quo in terms of valuing care work, and continue to deny women true equality with men. Both models concern themselves only with the redistribution of what is primarily *men's* work—paid employment or other activities that can be molded to resemble paid employment. True gender equality, according to Fraser, requires the redistribution of what is primarily *women's* work—care work—as well, along with the restructuring of social institutions including but not limited to the employment and dependent care sectors. Fraser calls this model of citizenship the *universal caretaker* model. “The key to achieving gender equity in a postindustrial welfare state...is to make women’s current life-patterns the norm for everyone” (1997, p. 61). Rather than paid employment and care work being divided between workers and caregivers, all citizens would be assumed to participate in both kinds of work, and social institutions, including the work place and the social welfare system, would be structured so as to support this dual responsibility. With this feminist reformulation of the paradigm of citizenship in mind, it becomes clear that a basic income promotes gender equality better than alternative safety net schemes.

1. Work-Conditioned Income Support

A work-conditioned income guarantee, where work is defined in a traditional, androcentric way to mean paid employment in the public sphere, and where the burdens of care are considered private problems for individuals to solve on their own, fails to promote the universal caretaker model of citizenship since it does nothing to challenge the gendered division of labor or the low status of care work of the status quo, and fails to eliminate or even reduce the exploitation of unpaid and low-paid caregivers.

Neither does the more gender-inclusive version of the *universal breadwinner model* advocated by Barbara Bergmann (2006), for example, promote the redistribution between men and women of employment and care work. The universal breadwinner model works to redistribute care work not between men and women, but between women and the state, between affluent women and

poor women, and likely between white and non-white women as well (Glenn, 1992). The socialization of care work through widespread availability of low-cost day care, preschool, after school, and elder care options aims to unburden women of as much care work as is possible through commodification. While greater institutionalization of care work is essential to making paid employment feasible for working women, this model does little to induce men to do more care work, since it does nothing to reduce paid work expectations for either gender. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the socialization of care would alter its gendered distribution: in the U.S., for example, over 90% of child care and preschool workers are women (Bergmann, 2005, table A1).¹ Women's increased economic status resulting from their earned income might provide them with the increased bargaining power to demand more after-hours care work of their male partners and relatives, but this model does nothing to improve the status of care work, and in fact further diminishes it by suggesting that unpaid care work is unworthy of either women or men as a vocation in comparison to paid employment. Women would likely continue to dominate paid care work as they do unpaid care work, and would be unlikely to find a reduction of their residual "second shift" at home under this model.

2. The Caregiver Income

A *caregiver income*, income support conditional on performing an unpaid care giving role, has been proposed by several feminists as a way of recognizing and valuing care, compensating caregivers, and raising the status of care work in society (Kittay, 1999, Abelda et al, 2004). In families with small children, for example, the caregiver income enables one parent to devote him or herself to care giving full-time without being completely economically dependent on the partner with earned income, and if generous enough allows single-parents to choose care giving over combining employment and childcare, a difficult thing to do particularly for low-skilled workers with small children.

If the caregiver income is not gender-specific but available to both men and women, it could have the effect of inducing some men to choose care giving over paid employment. But unless the income is very generous, it is likelier that the lower-paid parent—usually the woman—will make the care giving choice, rather than the higher paid parent. This, together with the fact that single-parents are

¹ Based on 2002 data from the Current Population Survey.

overwhelmingly female, would mean that that the caregiver income would reinforce, rather than challenge the gendered distribution of labor.

But even if the caregiver income was generous enough to induce equal numbers of men and women to avail themselves of it, it would still serve to reinforce the exploitation of caregivers, regardless of gender, by those who do not perform care work. A caregiver income suggests that care giving is comparable to a job with limited and definable hours and responsibilities, when in fact it is not. When workers are off-duty, they can enjoy leisure, but home-based care giving is a job that can be round the clock, depending on the nature of the person cared for (Okin, 1989, p. 151). Viewing care giving as a “job” with an income risks entrenching the view that it is an individual, “chosen” responsibility, rather than either a mandatory activity that someone must undertake or, more properly, a universal responsibility in which all should participate.

3. Basic Income

An unconditional basic income best compensates care work in accordance with the principles of the universal caretaker model of citizenship. Basic income compensates care and society’s other unpaid work without reinforcing the existing gendered distribution of labor or the primacy of the public sphere by equating care with work. Although basic income is often characterized as allowing people not to work, its most radical feature in comparison to current forms of welfare state redistribution is that it allows people to work without losing benefits immediately at a high effective rate of taxation. Because of its universality and its unconditionality, basic income preserves work incentives for all; at low levels of income it is not a substitute for earned income, but a complement, and operates as a wage subsidy (Van Parijs, 2001). This means that low-wage jobs, part-time work, or the volunteer work that can provide some of the non-financial benefits of paid employment, for both the individual and society, can become feasible in a way they are not under categorical or means-tested forms of redistribution. Together with other strategies to increase the flexibility of paid employment, basic income promotes the ability of individuals to choose the mix of paid work, care, and leisure that best meets their needs at any given time (Robeyns, 2000). Because no one has to choose between being a “worker” or a “caregiver” to receive income, basic income has the most potential of any compensation scheme to transform over time the relation of both men and women to the provision of care and to the world of paid employment.

Basic income is by no means enough on its own to achieve true gender equality, but the feminist justification of a basic income (Zelleke, 2008, McKay, 2005, 2007, Pateman, 2003, 2006), unlike justifications based on the traditional androcentric model of citizenship, suggests other institutional and policy changes as well to make sharing care giving responsibilities easier and more attractive for women and men. Some steps along the path to gender equality follow directly from the universal caretaker model of citizenship, and include the wider availability of part-time work and job-sharing; periodic leave for full-time care giving; the decoupling of access to benefits like health insurance and pensions from paid employment; the widespread availability of care centers, both publicly supported and private, for children, the elderly, and adults unable to care for themselves; and the reconfiguring of children's schooling away from an anachronistic schedule designed to conform to the requirements of an agricultural society and toward a schedule that recognizes the realities of paid employment demands on all caregivers (Graff, 2007). Other steps require extending the norm of gender neutrality now prevalent in higher education and professional workplaces, for example, to the still androcentric institutions of vocational education and skilled blue-collar workplaces (Bergmann, 2005, Estévez-Abe, 2006). Still other steps require a more radical restructuring of the employment sector including, for example, reductions in rewards for seniority or continuity of service in promotions or advancement to protected status in both blue collar and professional jobs.

None of these changes would guarantee on their own that men would scale back time spent in paid employment, or that if they did they would increase their time spent in care work. But they would decrease the costs to men of doing so, and would increase their opportunities to break out of the gendered distribution of labor that confines men to paid employment-centric models of contributory citizenship just as women are constrained in other ways (Robeyns, 2000, 2001). An unconditional basic income and the reduction of the dependency of the care giving partner on the employed partner for income, benefits, and status should encourage both men and women to combine both roles—worker and care giver—either simultaneously or in turn.

Could these institutional changes come about under the *universal breadwinner* or *caregiver parity* models? And if they were made, would they be as likely to reduce the gendered distribution of labor as I've argued would be the case under the universal caretaker model? Certainly the *universal breadwinner* model requires the institutionalization of extensive caregiving services, but the

foundation of its notion of citizenship on employment continues the exclusion of those who, for whatever reason, are unable or unwilling to work, rather than recognizing that those who do not work in paid employment may be performing other work important to the health and prosperity of their communities. Furthermore, the institutionalization of care may well increase the access of educated and professional women to male-dominated careers, but women at the lower end of the educational range will likely continue to provide the majority of paid care work as they do unpaid care work, because the *universal breadwinner* model contains nothing in it that elevates the status of care work or makes it more attractive for men.

The *caregiver parity* model of citizenship does better on this count than the universal breadwinner model, but still implies that citizens are to choose between paid employment and care giving. Caregivers would be compensated and could be covered by health insurance and pension programs similar to those available for paid employees, but their status as citizens will necessarily be second-class to those in paid employment, with the latter's opportunities for advancement and public recognition unavailable to full-time caregivers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for advocates of gender equality, a basic income by virtue of its universality goes to both providers and recipients of care, and thus has the best chance of eliminating poverty for the most vulnerable group in contemporary capitalist economies: single mothers and their children. This should be a strong argument in favor of basic income for any feminist.

Measures promoting gender equality, including wider availability and affordability of childcare services and greater availability of part-time work for men and women, could be institutionalized under any citizenship model, and should certainly be endorsed by feminists. But only basic income, by virtue of its universality, unconditionality, and unmonitored status, recognizes that all citizens have responsibilities and obligations outside of the sphere of paid employment. Because of this, basic income has the best chance of creating the social and economic conditions required to institutionalize the *universal caretaker*, allowing all citizens—men and women—to participate in care work and other unpaid work in the domestic sphere in addition to paid employment in the public sphere.

References

Abelda, Randy, and the Women's Committee of One Hundred (2004) "An Immodest Proposal," *Feminist Economics*, vol. 10 (no. 2), pp. 251-58.

- Beem, Christopher (2005) "Restoring the Civic Value of Care in a Post-Welfare Reform Society," in L. M. Mead and C. Beem (eds.) *Welfare Reform and Political Theory*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bergmann, Barbara (1998) "The Only Ticket to Equality: Total Androgyny, Male Style," *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues*, vol. 9 (Spring), pp. 75-86.
- _____ (2000) "Subsidizing Child Care by Mothers At Home," *Feminist Economics*, vol. 6 (March), pp. 77-88.
- _____ (2005) *The Economic Emergence of Women*, 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- _____ (2006) "A Swedish-Style Welfare State or Basic Income: Which Should Have Priority?" in E. O. Wright (ed.) *Redesigning Distribution: Basic Income and Stakeholder Grants as Cornerstones for an Egalitarian Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
- Fraser, Nancy (1997) "After the Family Wage: A Postindustrial Thought Experiment," in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*. New York: Routledge.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano (1992) "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 18 (no. 1), pp. 1-43.
- Graff, E.J. (2007) "The Opt-Out Myth," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April), pp. 51-54.
- Kittay, Eva Feder (1999) *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*. New York: Routledge.
- McKay, Ailsa (2005) *The Future of Social Security Policy: Women, work and a Citizens' Basic Income*. New York: Routledge.
- _____ (2007) "Why a Citizen's Basic Income? A Question of Gender Equality or Gender Bias," *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 21 (no. 2), pp. 337-48.
- Mink, Gwendolyn (1995) "Wage Work, Family Work, and Welfare Politics," *Feminist Economics*, vol. 1 (Summer), pp. 95-98.
- Okin, Susan Moller (1989) *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. New York: Basic Books.

Pateman, Carole (2003) "Freedom and Democratization: Why Basic Income is to be Preferred to Basic Capital," in K. Dowding, J. De Wispelaere, and S. White (eds.) *The Ethics of Stakeholding*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

_____ "(2006) Democratizing Citizenship: Some Advantages of a Basic Income," in E. O. Wright ed., *Redesigning Distribution: Basic Income and Stakeholder Grants as Cornerstones for an Egalitarian Capitalism*. New York: Verso.

Roebyns, Ingrid (2000) "Hush Money or Emancipation Fee? A Gender Analysis of Basic Income," in R. van der Veen and L. Groot (eds.) *Basic Income on the Agenda: Policy Objectives and Political Chances*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

_____ (2001) "Will a Basic Income do Justice to Women?" *Analyse & Kritik*, vol. 23 (no. 1), pp. 88-105

Van Parijs, Philippe (2001) "A Basic Income for All," in P. Van Parijs et al, *What's Wrong with a Free Lunch?* Boston: Beacon Press.

Zelleke, Almaz (2008) "Reconsidering Independence: Foundations of a Feminist Theory of Distributive Justice," paper presented at the Basic Income Earth Network Congress, Dublin, Ireland, June 2008. Available at <http://www.basicincomeireland.com>.

Almaz Zelleke
The New School
66 W. 12th Street
New York, NY 10011
United States
Email: zellekea@newschool.edu