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Gender Inequality, Social Reproduction and the Universal Basic Income

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Abstract
Despite extensive attention being paid to the effects of the Universal Basic Income (UBI) on society at large, there has been little analysis on the relationship between gender inequality and UBI. The purpose of this article is first to reflect on the feminist arguments in favour of UBI and then to examine some of these points by also considering other available policies. By looking into the role of women's work in both productive and reproductive activities, it is argued that UBI should not be disregarded as a social policy. However, its transformative capacity to empower women and to strengthen their role in society should not be overestimated. In order to address this gap, policy makers should address misconceptions around gender norms and acknowledge the multiple forms of women's work across the social relations of production and reproduction.

Keywords: gender, labour, social reproduction, UBI, welfare state, work

Introduction: the state of gender inequality in contemporary neoliberal capitalism

UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME (UBI) is a policy that provides money transfer on a regular basis to any citizen of a country regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or productive and reproductive capacity. Recently, UBI has attracted enormous attention and support across different political and theoretical fronts, including liberal, green, populist and democratic socialists. The imperative is to place gender front and centre of future political, economic, and policy considerations, specifically with regard to how the UBI relates to the consequences of the recent politics of neoliberal austerity and the need for a wider restructuring of the relationship between women, work and welfare.

With the rise of modern capitalism, be pro-worker legislation in the West have kept children and seniors out of the factories, centering adult male workers at the core of the labour force. This 'productivist' setting solidified progressive political projects around the working class, but also implied a gendered division of labour within and outside the household. In particular, women were expected to support the family's 'social reproduction' at home by being responsible for food preparation, cleaning, childcare, elderly care, and so on. However, in the postwar period, the feminist movements—with the support of social democratic parties—promoted and were successful in ensuring that as the welfare state developed, public services provision for childcare, elderly care, and pensions were established. As a result, women were partially relieved from reproductive work, and their increased participation in the formal labour market enabled the fulfilment of women's intellectual, economic and social aspirations.

Yet, such progressive trends did not last. Neoliberalism changed social relations in ways that eroded women's material and sociopolitical emancipation. Women's engagement in paid work soon became less of a choice and more of a necessity, because male wages were no longer sufficient to maintain decent household living standards. Yet, women are often the first to be fired, and are subject to precarious contracts and part-time work.[1] Also, women with low socioeconomic status, from minority backgrounds, or in non-heteronormative relationships, are often the most exposed victims of

the costs of austerity paying with less work, the worst working conditions, low incomes or, worse, no job at all.[2]

The neoliberal model also dismantled social protection and benefits in favour of privatisation of care services and means-tested social security.[3] The shrinking of the welfare state has contributed to the transfer of care responsibilities back into the household, or in the form of commodified services in the market. For those who can afford it, the commodification of social reproduction has changed in various ways: from the multiplication of private nursery and elderly care agencies to the proliferation in the use of ready-meals and take-away food. Furthermore, an increasing amount of reproductive labour is performed largely by migrants and women of colour. The inability by some to pay for such goods and services has exacerbated exclusion and social inequality. Women who cannot afford these services engage in creative forms of 'care sharing economy' such as home-based childminders and shared nannies. Hence, yet again, the most vulnerable poor are women, who have faced increasing pressure to cope with the 'double burden' of productive labour and reproductive work. They are not only poor in a strict economic sense, but they also suffer from time poverty, which hampers their socio-economic mobility, wellbeing and, political participation.

These worsening conditions in the three areas of care, work and welfare reflect the gendered crisis of neoliberalism and it is not a coincidence that atomistic and monetised policy solutions have become popular across the whole political spectrum. One of the solutions proposed is UBI—the focus of this article, in which I examine the arguments advocating for the positive effects of UBI on women and social reproductive work. I then discuss the limitations of those arguments and reflect on the under-investigated tensions these have missed. Finally, the conclusion will ask relevant questions which untangle the case for a deep transformation of the socio-economic structure of the economy.

The gender case for UBI

Although the object of a contested debate, UBI has been supported by feminists from both socialist and liberal perspectives, with many different arguments having been put forward. It has been argued that UBI is an emancipatory policy which is able to promote human rights and even up power relations between men and women.[4] As Kathi Weeks suggests, by giving 'some measure of relief from the daily grind of sheer survival', UBI could 'shak[e] things up' by 'offering both men and women the opportunity to experience their working lives a little differently and to reorient their relationships to their jobs and households accordingly', in a 'more just, equitable and sustaining way'.[5] UBI can thus increase the quality of life by incentivising people to spend more time on leisure and care, and creating the conditions to redistribute the burden of reproductive work along more equal gender lines. UBI, it is argued, can enable better capabilities and material emancipation.

Some feminists see the UBI as the solution to correcting the productivist bias toward certain kinds of work on which the welfare system is based. Domestic work, although it is essential to reproduce and maintain the capitalist mode of production, situates women in a condition of exploitation in the household and forces them into a position of permanent material disadvantage.[6] The International Wages for Housework Campaign was a global movement born in Italy in 1972 which advocated for recognition of this through the provision of a social wage rewarding domestic work and care as paid labour. By decoupling monetary compensation from the traditional relations of capitalist production, women were demanding wages for any form of work within and outside the home. UBI is a natural upgrading of these initiatives. In other words, commodifying non-labour (unpaid) and decommodifying productive labour, is perceived as a way of enabling alternative forms of social relations which differ from those of the traditional capitalist labour market.[7] So, a central contribution of any possible UBI format is its ability to create the conditions whereby women are able to renegotiate the hidden value of unpaid work in society, that is, of nurturing and caring for others, and reduce gender inequalities.

On a more political level, UBI can relieve women from daily economic constraints—

especially for those facing unemployment with little or no access to social benefits—and expand the possibility of social, political, and civic engagement. It would also bypass the androcentrism of many households in which the male breadwinner holds monopoly and monopsony over financial resources. UBI can therefore increase the decision-making power over spending decisions, and expand the autonomy and freedom of both women in paid and unpaid work.[8] In other words, it can increase their bargaining position, empowering women over and against partners, husband and employers.[9]

UBI would be able to strengthen the links between women and the welfare state by, for instance, focussing a tax benefit system based on individuals rather than households. In addition, UBI would be able to eliminate the conditionalities imposed by means-tested eligibility criteria, which are particularly intrusive for women.

Being a universal transfer, it is also claimed that UBI would be able to reach people at the margins, where the welfare state is often found wanting. It could thus alleviate poverty and provide financial security and stability, regardless of specific conditions in the household and at work. UBI will relieve people from unnecessary bureaucracy and waiting lists with which the most disadvantaged struggle in their daily lives. In sum, UBI will be able to deliver better wellbeing, equality, more freedom, and equal entitlements for women, dissolve old interdependencies and invent newer healthier ones—both at the level of the household and the state.[10]

The gender case against UBI: a social reproduction approach

Social reproduction is 'the domain where lives are sustained and reproduced', in other words how workers and households—but also capitalists, as well as all kinds of institutions of religion, state and culture—subsist and survive through the relations of production of which they are part.[11] The social reproduction framework underscores that much of the work responsible for reproducing these forms and relations relies on the exploitation of women in the home and elsewhere—in the care home, the school, the hospital and the crèche. As Tithi Bhattacharya writes, '[t]he most historically enduring site for the reproduction of labour power is of course the kin-based unit we call the family'. But, she continues, labour power 'is not simply replenished at home, nor is it always reproduced generationally.' '[O]ther social relationships and institutions are comprised by the circuit of social reproduction' including care, health services, education, leisure, pensions, benefits.[12] Contemporary conditions in many rich advanced economies have led some to identify a 'crisis of care' synonymous with a crisis in the aforementioned forms of social reproduction.[13] This depends, as mentioned above, on the changing relations between women and labour and on the shift in state support in society. By focussing on the sphere of reproductive work and the gendered division of labour that circumscribes it, a social reproduction approach creates a challenge for the prescription of the UBI, highlighting how the latter situates work exclusively within the dynamic of buying and selling labour power, rather than the specific social conditions that make it both possible and necessary to begin with.[14]

Yet, whilst Marxist feminists taking a social reproduction standpoint have been central in popularising the call for a UBI—for example, around the 'Wages for Housework' campaigns—others have been more circumspect. Weeks notes that the 'demand for a UBI does not directly address either the unequal gendered division of household-based reproductive labour or its privatization', even 'serv[ing] simply to offer more support for the traditional hetero-patriarchal family's gender division of productive and reproductive labour, with more men participating in waged work and more women working in the home'.[15]

But even with the rise of the 'dual-earner' household model, women have still had a much more precarious and undervalued relationship with work than men. Indeed, once women are cut off from the wage-subsistence relationship, they face additional direct and indirect risks of segregation, subordination, and dependence based on asymmetrical income relations.[16] For instance, less work means fewer and smaller pensions and social insurance. Therefore, welfare benefits

and public services often have to be accessed through the husband or male partner.[17] Yet, this institutionalised disadvantage is unlikely to be challenged substantially by the implementation of the UBI, which risks deepening the dependence on men for income, and of reinforcing both the gender pay gap and social poverty gaps in the long term. Furthermore, UBI could well reduce women's space for formative and rewarding work by creating an incentive for women to remain at home, intensifying gendered social segregation and isolation. The consequent alienation could reduce the chance of joining political movements and trade unions, which are still fundamental formative institutions for political engagement in a capitalist society.

The points outlined above indicate how the negative effects of UBI on women have largely been ignored in most analysis thus far. Put in another way, it is clear that there exists a general lack of understanding of the potential consequences of UBI. We lack an analysis that, for instance, would assess comprehensively the intergenerational consequences of UBI in the long term. UBI may make small changes to people's lives during a time of crisis like the one in which we are currently living, and can relieve pressure from gendered poverty in the immediate term. However, if the causes of such poverty —such as gender-based discrimination, wage gaps, an androcentric welfare system, unequal care responsibilities and lack of job opportunities—persist and remain embedded in the dominant social relations of production and reproduction, the UBI has achieved nothing of any lasting value.

Furthermore, rather than expanding women's bargaining power, UBI runs the risk of diverting attention from the actual source of structural gender inequality. UBI, by oversimplifying the material complexities, as well as the social differences between work and labour, could reduce women's political space for claiming back their rights to self-determination. This is not to downplay the urgency in addressing social and economic injustice, but rather to recognise the need to focus our attention on equally probable risks that the implementation of the UBI might entail in terms of de-politicisation of the causes and consequences of everlasting poverty. Last, but not least, the implementation of a UBI will not automatically eliminate the sexist attitudes and norms that created gender conflicts in the first place.[18] In this sense, UBI could worsen the wellbeing of poorer women by making them vulnerable to new ways of financial expropriation, that is, some men could manage to divert the funds allocated to women under UBI. This has happened already in situations where women start engaging with income earning opportunities and yet do not have full control of their spending decisions.

By replacing universal provision of social services with commoditised needs and services, the neoliberal state has relinquished its responsibility for the social reproduction of the family and society at large. In this context, UBI might also reinforce the political trends towards the monetisation and individualisation of the provision of such needs and services. As a result, while inequality and social injustice increase, a gendered crisis of care would remain, because women would be stuck within the same set of patriarchal inspired duties of domestic labour and care at precisely the point when they have the least time and security in which to perform them. Unemployed women who sit at home will not only struggle to pay utility bills and risk feeling disenfranchised from the potentially dignifying experience of having a job, but will also stand to suffer a rise in social exclusion. In the context of these conditions, proponents for a UBI claim that the measure will help delegitimise the inquisitorial system currently used for determining eligibility for social benefits. However, the focus should be on the structure and processes through which the eligibility criteria are assessed rather than identifying UBI as the way out.

Many are studying possible policy alternatives. Barbara R. Bergmann claims that the provision of free childcare highlights the different impacts of a UBI and the welfare state on gender inequality.[19] She says that whereas a UBI expands the opportunities for leisure, free childcare increases the options for paid employment. Bergmann continues by arguing that greater employment opportunities are likely to be more important for reducing gender inequality than UBI. Many employers have come to see women as long-term participants in the workplace and,

therefore, people worth training, putting into jobs leading to promotion, and then being considered for promotion. This kind of progress would be reversed if a higher proportion of women withdrew from the labour force when their first child was born because of a lack of affordable childcare.

Universal Basic Services is also an appealing scheme.[20] Proposed in 2017 as a revival of the objective of redistribution and collective responsibilities and cohesion of the 'old fashioned' welfare state, it proposes a set of public, free, basic, and quasi-universal services to address material needs such as shelters, sustenance, healthcare, education, legal support, transport and communication. Although in its original forms it lacked the much needed publicly funded provision of care, its recent version includes childcare and adult social care, which could reduce both gendered poverty and inequality. This approach goes in the right direction in two ways: it decouples the provision of societal wellbeing from market-oriented, individualistic and 'productivistic' mechanisms, and it avoids the blurring of the line between citizens and consumers.

Whilst sympathetic to the proposal of a UBI, Daniel Sage details more targeted responses to the problems it raises. These include 'expanding parental leave for both mothers and fathers', 'incentivizing people to work fewer hours', 'enabling people to take periods of leave from employment', targeted 'guarantee income schemes' aimed towards the young or over-fifties, and 'encouraging more people—especially men—to fulfil caring responsibilities without significant economic penalties'.[21] These could work in concert with equal pay and better work conditions, which enable a more inclusive breadwinner model.

In general, more targeted measures to deal with gendered redistribution of unpaid labour around the activities of social reproduction and care provision are needed. A differentiated system of child benefit in the UK has created significant gains for women, but is still unaffordable for the most marginal and precarious at work—both men and women. Put on a proper footing, all of these measures promise to confront the crisis of social reproduction—and the crisis of the welfare state behind which it is concealed—in a more effective and practical way than the UBI. Indeed, even were we to accept that the latter can do what it claims, UBI can only carry through on its potentially emancipatory promise when accompanied by more systematic state interventions that acknowledge the complexity of work, life and wellbeing in contemporary capitalism. UBI will not create a system able to reconstruct social norms, but a more targeted social welfare system could. From this perspective, the full-blown implementation of UBI schemes in the near future should not appeal to those for whom gender equality is a primary goal, unless it is complemented by a comprehensive set of public social infrastructure reforms that create a social contract based on solidarity.

Conclusions

Women are increasingly integrated within the waged labour market, but they remain at the same time the primary caregivers of society, at a time where state support for care is being withdrawn. Thus, the double burden many women juggle with—namely between productive and reproductive work—is not only reinforced within the market, but also legitimised by patriarchal norms that become institutionalised through state policies. The UBI alone will not be able to resolve this situation. UBI, because it would still be embedded in pre-existing patriarchal and institutional norms, is gender neutral *ex-ante* but not *ex-post*. It is not gender neutral, because it implies undesired consequences for women if it is unable to challenge and readdress their pre-existing position of disadvantage in society.

The response of some Marxist feminists has been to see the basic income and the recognition of women's paid and unpaid work as intrinsically interdependent. Paid and unpaid work is subject to shaped by public and private institutions regulated by the state which, if reformed, can generate transformative change in the way we deal with care, work and welfare as a whole. Workers' organisations, the welfare system and labour legislation need to work to overcome the structural shortfalls of single-wage households and develop more heterogeneous and fluid mechanisms of social protection

and public goods that can dissolve existing patriarchal social norms, redistribute unpaid work duties to men (through, for example, shared parental leave), and tackle the regulatory obstacles faced within non-heteronormative households.

Governments have the tools to regulate and deconstruct social relations with targeted policies and create the necessary institutions to reflect the social heterogeneity we live in. Hence, policy makers should develop policy solutions that have the potential to be transformative for women's material and social disparities in the short and long term. Inequality in reproductive work does not always explain the inequalities occurring in the formal labour market or in the political sphere. Those separate dimensions reinforce the need to redefine what work is and transform the welfare state built around it. Unfortunately, neither UBI nor any form of cash transfer would help this difficult process.

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Notes

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