

Universal basic income in a feminist perspective and gender analysis

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A feminist perspective and a gender analysis – avoiding conflation of gender and women – can usefully contribute to the discussion on the universal basic income (UBI). Indeed, it helps analyse the concrete situation of women and of men, by looking into power relationships between them and structural discrimination based on sex, including multiple/intersectional discriminations.¹ These contribute to making women and those they care for vulnerable to poverty with its various deprivations. Advocates of the UBI could thus reinforce their strong arguments based on social justice, equality, dignity, freedom from want if they argued (more) systematically also from a gender equality perspective.²

The UBI, if unconditional and at a level covering basic needs, would help tackle the structural inequalities inherited from the past, due to the sexual divide between the public and private sphere. Although the normative framework has improved in many countries of the North and South, and women's education is now higher than men's in a number of countries, in average, women still face de facto unequal chances of political, economic and social participation. Their educational efforts are not rewarded the same: the higher their education, the greater the gender pay gap – one of the most depressing statistics one can consider. A recent study on the discrimination experienced by women due to pregnancy and maternity in the United Kingdom shows how deeply discrimination is embedded in society and how it prevents an equal access to the world of work and equal chances in this world, even after decades of efforts, legal and practical, in one of the most advanced economies, to implement gender equality in this field.³

Feminist economists have for decades criticized mainstream economic theory for considering only remunerated work in the so-called production sector, and gross domestic product (GDP) still considers only this sector. Change occurs, there are now numerous publications and data in economic and social sciences addressing unpaid, care work and its relation to the various disadvantages women face. But even with this new approach and the almost general recognition that gender equality is key to economic development, care

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work remains mainly female. Even though satellite accounts give information on the value of reproductive work, it is still either not really considered as work if provided for free in the private sphere or, if it is provided against pay, in a work relationship, it is often poorly paid and considered. Reproductive work, mainly accomplished by women the world over, for free or very little money, thus remains steadfastly insufficiently addressed in practice in the labour market and legislation, as well as the homes of people.⁴ Women pay a high price for providing the largest part of care work in the home, as this limits the access or choices of girls to education and the access of women to paid work, deprives them of the autonomy that goes with an income and the protection of social security systems when one is in place, and thus exposes them to the risk of poverty and dependence.

In industrialized countries, work organization, labour legislation and social security systems developed progressively based on the model of the male breadwinner. Therefore, as most social security systems are (still) based on contributions linked to remunerated work, independent or salaried, the inferior income of women, their restriction to part-time jobs as well as the interruptions in their careers due to care responsibilities will directly impact the level of social protection they can expect in case of old age, disability, illness and so on, as well as expose them to depend on a partner and/or the (welfare) state.

Progressively, legislators in industrialized countries have attempted to correct the sexist bias contained in the social protection legislation, with its link to remunerated work. But the 'original sin' remains in a number of countries and it continues to penalize women. However, the rapid increase of the precariat exposes more and more men also, to deep gaps in social protection, if it continues to be principally or exclusively tied to remunerated work. Ken Loach's film '*I, Daniel Blake*' denounces the Kafkaian world in which people in need of support find themselves in a system that provokes their exclusion of benefits to which they were entitled and illustrates the abuses that the control system can produce.

As women, especially heads of households, are exposed to a far higher degree than men to poverty, they also are more exposed to the stigmatization and marginalization provoked by poverty. An unconditional UBI would contribute to freeing them from this vulnerability and would respect their dignity. It could also help balance unequal power relationships with (male) relatives and/or partners.

A UBI would help social security systems to keep up with the challenges they face: increase of inequality and persistence of gender inequality, recurring economic and financial crises, technological change and globalization and their effects on jobs (number and quality) and social protection,⁵ demographic evolution and migration patterns. It would also contribute to strengthening the social fabric, needed for the future of democracies.⁶ If they do not rapidly handle these challenges, and the fears created by them, democratic systems could lose their legitimacy⁷ with citizens no longer considering them capable to ensure a fair enough re-distribution of the fruits of increased productivity. Female citizens have a particular stake in the introduction of a UBI to maintain systems that respect their human rights and freedoms as, generally, authoritarian governments have quite restrictive views of women's rights and gender equality.

Many developing countries have established programmes for universal social protection, and some have shown that it is possible even in poor countries. 'Where there is a will, there is a way' remains as true today as at the time the first social laws were adopted.

But it remains a huge political challenge to overcome the resistance against delinking social protection and remunerated work, even when the latter tends to become more and more uncertain.

The international legal framework on human rights can certainly be used to advocate for the introduction of a UBI, also in a gendered perspective, to all persons, at a level that covers their basic needs, with no conditionalities.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Recommendation 202 of 2012 on social protection floors and the Sustainable Development Goals⁸ (SDGs) adopted in September 2015 by all member countries of the United Nations are important elements of soft law and/or political commitments⁹ completing the international human rights framework offered by articles 9, 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as well as articles 11, 12, 13 and 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and of course the Universal Declaration on Human Rights articles 3, 22, 23 and 25. Social protection and care are mentioned in three of the SDGs: ending poverty (no. 1), reducing inequality (no. 2) and reaching gender equality (no. 5). In addition, Goal 17 on governance could also be used. It remains to be seen whether the SDGs give the necessary impetus for States to implement the human rights norms that most of them have ratified but that many violate or ignore far too often.

A UBI would be the continuation of the previous efforts to ensure that every person has a right to basic economic security, everywhere on the planet, women as well as men. A UBI would thus be part of an emancipatory politics for all, linking economic security to all other human rights including gender equality, and ensuring every person the dignity and personal calm of having enough to provide for their basic needs. It would be of historical significance that human beings not born rich could benefit from this security and that those unable to be in the labour market, formal or informal (or only in reduced fashion), would also benefit from it. Again, in view of the present level of gender inequality in certain parts of the world, women and their dependents have a lot to gain from such a change. The UBI would be the logical evolution of all previous social security measures. It can be transformative, as is hoped for with the Agenda 2030 on the SDGs. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity.

Notes

1. UN WOMEN, 2015, TRANSFORMING ECONOMIES, REALIZING RIGHTS; UNRISD 2010, COMBATING POVERTY AND INEQUALITY, Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics, pp. 107–128.
2. Judith Shulevitz, It's Payback Time for Women, the *New York Times*, 8 January 2016.
3. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/509500/BIS-16-145-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-summary.pdf
4. Domestic migrant workers remain among the most discriminated against women, and are exposed to a high risk of abuse as the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has repeatedly noted in its Concluding Observations and Recommendations
5. *Changing Work: Progressive Ideas for the Modern World of Work*, ed. by Y. Cooper, Fabian Society, 2016

6. Claire Slatter, *The State of States*, in *The Remaking of Social Contracts*, ed. by Gita Sen and Marina Durano, Zed Books, 2014
7. See Note 5.
8. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goal> and <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>
9. Adopted in 1995 at the 4th World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action could also be a useful basis.

Author biography

Patricia Schulz is a Swiss lawyer, who headed the Swiss Federal Office for Gender Equality (FOGE), from 1994 to 2010. She is a member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2011-2018). She is also a member of the Board of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD, 2011-2017). She worked with the International Labour Organisation in Madagascar (1977-1978) and in the Faculty of Law of Geneva (1978-1993), in public, administrative and constitutional law.