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Article

Basic Income: The Potential for Gendered Empowerment?

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Abstract

Basic income is likely to gain momentum as the next social welfare trend to sweep over the world with ideas of how to improve the fairness and efficiency of distributing money. Other earlier movements with similar ambitions to transform societies, ranging across the political spectrum from socialism to neo-liberalism, have led to very different consequences for strata of citizens, but have in common that they have de-prioritised gender equality in favour of other interests. Advocates of basic income suggest that in addition to pragmatic gains, such as a more efficient state administration, primarily a basic income will empower citizens, leading to the potential for greater human flourishing. Our question is whether this empowerment will be gendered and if so, how? So far, the basic income debate addresses gender only in so far as it would raise the income of the poorest, of whom a larger proportion are women. However, it is less clear how it might contribute to a transformation of gendered behaviour, making possible divergent shapes of life where binary and set notions of gender are not a restriction. We discuss the idea of basic income from a perspective of gender equality in the Swedish context.

Keywords

basic income; empowerment; feminism; gender equality; parental leave; Sweden; universal worker model

Issue

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1. Introduction

Basic Income is a social welfare movement currently gaining momentum across the world. It has ambitions to transform societies, with a particular emphasis on the empowerment of citizens, and greater human flourishing among its central goals. History shows us that a common characteristic of political movements this ambitious is that they have tended to de-prioritise gender equality in favour of other interests. Our question then is whether this empowerment would be gendered, and in that case how. Our discussion is hypothetical as basic income is suggested and debated, but not yet implemented.

The basic income debate addresses gender in so far that it would raise the economic situation of the poorest, of whom a larger proportion are women. Thus, gendered economic inequality may be decreased. Less clear, is

how it might contribute to a transformation of gendered behaviour, supporting possible divergent ways of being where binary and set notions of gender are not a restriction. Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect a basic income to be a panacea for all social ills and advocates are not making such a claim. We discuss the idea of basic income from a feminist perspective in the Swedish context (as outcomes may vary substantially across countries, depending not least on progress already made towards gender equality). We consider that a basic income alone is unlikely to deliver on gender equality, as whilst it could be a necessary ‘instrument of freedom’, money alone is not a sufficient instrument with which to realise gender equality: other structures are also needed.

Gender equality is variously conceptualised and thus understandings of what a gender equal world might look like differ (see e.g., Charles & Grusky, 2004; Mandel,

2009; Olorenshaw, 2016). In this article, we take as our cornerstone that gender equality would be realised if there were no difference, at the population level, in the distribution of mothers and fathers taking parental leave and participating in the labour market. Some parents might contribute to this non-gendered distribution by sharing parental leave equally, whilst others might see a particular parent taking the majority of parental leave days, but importantly, on average, this parent would not be more likely to be male or female.

A universal basic income has yet to be introduced by any national government (De Wispelaere, 2016). There have been guaranteed minimum income experiments in the 1970s in North America (Forget, 2011) and more recent experiments such as in India (Davala, Jhabvala, Mehta, & Standing, 2015). Finland had a small-scale experiment in the field (Kela, 2016), as has Canada (Macdonald, 2016), and Scotland is working on the feasibility of a basic income experiment (Painter, Thorold, & Cooke, 2018). Gender equality has not been the focus of these experiments. In Sweden, a basic income is debated in various ways; from economic calculations around its feasibility to ideological discussions of its implication for the meaning of work (see e.g., Ekstrand, 1996; Jansson, 2003; Kildal, 2001; Paulsen, 2010). As such, this article is necessarily based primarily on theoretical reflections as well as being informed by empirical research on gender equality and policies such as parental leave that set out to reduce gender inequalities, particularly in Sweden.

The Swedish welfare state has long been premised on the universal (paid) worker model. Much care work has been transferred to public services in Sweden, and so to a certain degree is included in this definition of 'paid activity as work', but this is much less true of other domestic work. The universal worker model is concerned with human dignity, the right to work and economic independence, in a way that has been neglected in recent years, where the emphasis across the European Union has rather been on labour market 'activation' and benefit conditionality. The central tenet of the universal worker model is the value to human flourishing of being engaged in paid activity that is meaningful to a community; and an understanding of how core such a contribution is to social inclusion. In Sweden, this is often expressed through the workline ('arbetslinjen'), very prominent in the beginning of the 2000s, where every working-age adult is encouraged to participate in the labour market, to the extent that is possible. To participate in the labour market is also the basis for most benefits in the national social insurance system (Socialförsäkringsutredningen, 2005). The state is in part seen as responsible for providing individuals with the opportunity to contribute, which is important for gender equality. In this article, we explore how this fits or not with the basic income project.

Basic income is a freedom project. The question is whether money is sufficient to procure such freedom. Money, a floor to stand on, surely helps, but it will not be likely on its own to challenge norms, for example around

parenting practices. We do not operate as individuals in isolation from structures: the structures of the household and family, community and states. A contribution of feminist policy-making and scholarship has been the observation that freedom of action is contingent on certain structures being in place (of which a basic income might be one). These structures rely on state intervention or 'dictate'. It is impossible to entirely escape the norms, which govern our behaviour, but we can—and frequently do—use the state to help shape new norms. We consider which 'structures' are useful to the project of gender equality, and ask how compatible they might be with a basic income.

The article begins with a discussion of the universal basic income and gender equality. Then we explore that the conditions for 'real freedom' might entail active shaping of norms in a society and that the state may have a role to play here, beyond the basic income instrument. We bring examples of Swedish interventions, which have the aim of reducing gender inequalities.

2. Universal Basic Income from a Feminist Perspective

A universal basic income can be defined as 'an income paid by a political community to all its members on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement' (Van Parijs, 2004, p. 8; see also Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). Whilst not a new idea per se, basic income as a policy proposal can be said to be one of the few truly radical shake-ups to welfare systems currently being mooted by actors across the political spectrum (Reed & Lansley, 2016). A key contrast between the basic income model and most current social welfare models is that those considered of core working age, and able to be actively seeking employment, would also receive such payments without means test or work requirement. This would include parents and other carers (Van Parijs, 2004). At its ideological core is a call for liberation, for 'real freedom' for all living within a given political community (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, chapter 1).

Many claims are made on what a basic income might achieve. Claims for a basic income include reducing poverty and benefit traps, cutting bureaucracy, matching security systems to better correspond with changes in working life, increasing wages, supporting creativity and entrepreneurship, reducing unhealthy dependencies within relationships, increasing wellbeing, and the list continues (Kela, 2016). Some also claim that a basic income would reduce gender inequalities in society (McKay, 2001). However, the basic income movement makes no claims to be an explicitly feminist project (whilst acknowledging there are various feminisms).

In some ways, a basic income would be similar to existing 'cash for care' policies, which are not generally associated with increased gender equality (e.g. Mandel, 2009). In part, this is because such cash benefits reduce political pressure to provide comprehensive care, education and health services. Although advocates of a basic in-

come are clear that a basic income only replaces benefits up to that amount, and in no way replaces existing services, it is quite common in parental leave policy debates, that cash benefits are explicitly used instead of providing care services for very young children (e.g., Kurowska, 2019). The concern is that should such political trade-offs around resources occur, and should a basic income be seen as a replacement for early years education and care services as political compromise kicks in, this would have significant gendered implications.

The central question asked by those sceptical of the viability of a basic income is how the costs incurred would be borne by a society, initially and over time. In terms of the level of payment, Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) suggest a quarter of GDP per capita might be appropriate. For Sweden in 2017, this would amount to 114 450 SEK yearly (approximately €950 monthly). The recent Swiss Referendum in 2016 suggested 2,500 Swiss francs (approximately €2,155) per month. The Finnish experiment lands at €560 monthly, which is not sufficiently high to be considered a basic income in the sense suggested by its advocates. It is likely that a basic income payment would indeed be quite low due to the demands even a guaranteed minimum income would make on any tax base (Tobin, 1970). As such, other possibilities for funding might include changes to the tax treatment of capital or banking on public ownership of natural resources (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). In the case that the payment was relatively low, such as is typically the case for 'cash for care' policies, this has been associated with women becoming more rather than less financially dependent on their male partners (e.g. Mandel, 2009). Similarly, evidence from the Canadian guaranteed annual income experiment suggests mothers took longer maternity leaves, leading to increased economic dependency on their male partners (Forget, 2011).

Policies can be multi-dimensional in the way that they support citizens, going beyond financial support and services. Taking parental leave as an example, this is a policy—in the Swedish context at least—that aims to tackle gendered patterns of behaviour, by promoting fathers' involvement with small children to a greater extent than might occur in the absence of the policy instrument (e.g. the daddy quota) (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011). Parental leave is also a form of employment protection, and originally was a key determinant for women being able to keep an attachment to the labour force after becoming parents (Cedstrand, 2011). It is also credited with changing norms and behaviours. In Sweden, the reserved part for each parent in the parental leave was intensively debated when first introduced in the 1990s, but then extended without almost any debate in the 2000s (Cedstrand, 2011). So basic income poses a risk in its simplicity if there is the possibility that it might replace more complex policy instruments with financial benefit alone.

A basic income could potentially reduce unhealthy dependencies both within personal relationships and

with employers. A worry however is that a basic income might be seen to reinforce barriers to the labour market for those who might most benefit from it (drawing upon the universal model of inclusion). Linked to this, there might also be less political pressure to safeguard routes into training essential for social mobility and integration (e.g., of migrant workers) (Hassel, 2017). Gender income gaps related to the differential return to work of mothers following childbirth may also become less of a political concern. This may also enhance social class and other differences between groups in any given society, calling for an intersectional analysis.

Whilst individualised basic income payments could well be an instrument of freedom to live individually for some, it is likely that many of us would still be living in households, and that many decisions (such as the division of paid and unpaid labour) would still likely be made at the household or wider extended family level. Whilst a basic income would provide women with unconditional income and thus recognise the social value of (gendered) caregiving (Fitzpatrick, 1999; McKay, 2001, 2005; Zelleke, 2011), it might also risk reinforcing gendered practices, and thus further entrench gender inequalities and maintain financial dependency within personal relationships (Robeyns, 2001). A basic income could contribute to poverty alleviation and personal independence for some, but it might also reinforce withdrawal from the labour market and public life for certain groups, such as mothers of young children, in so far as financial decisions were still taken at household level (Fitzpatrick, 1999).

3. Basic Income: A Necessary but not Sufficient Instrument of Freedom

Under practically any imaginable basic-income reform, women would benefit far more than men, whether in terms of income or in terms of life options. (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 185)

Women would disproportionately benefit from such an individual payment. So, why do some feminists feel uneasy about the prospect? What is the problem with wholeheartedly endorsing such a project? We suggest that the extension 'in terms of life options', might not be so obvious, at least if care work is part of the equation for a given individual.

A basic income is seen by its advocates as an instrument of freedom. If a basic income may entrench gendered patterns, it would do so in the context of a positive freedom. That is to say that a basic income would provide a greater freedom for a range of options, and if women 'choose' to withdraw from the labour market in favour of, for e.g., childcare, then this is quite different from a prescription to be carers: or is it? What about norms and the role of the state in shaping these? This is a feminist contribution: to have shown that norms and structures matter for the decisions we make. Choices are restricted by viable alternatives and norms of 'right choices' are trans-

formed into culture, traditional expectations and institutions endorsing certain choices.

Eduardo Suplicy, a Brazilian basic income ‘champion’ is famous for saying ‘the best way out is through the door’ (cited in Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, chapter 1). His point is that the most obvious solution is sometimes a very good solution; in the case of lack of income being a restrictive factor for the exercise of freedom, the obvious solution is to distribute money more effectively and fairly so that more people can express their will to a greater extent. For basic income activists this translates as a payment, which is individualised, universal and unconditional. For feminism, there is perhaps a different, also obvious solution (men need to share the unpaid domestic and caring work), and it is not likely to be delivered by a basic income alone.

Basic income seeks to support our ambitions, without dictating what these should be. It makes the assumption that the power differential would be sufficiently shifted by the individualised payment to women for them to negotiate different domestic arrangements, and that norms would be flexible enough to accommodate a greater—and less gendered—range of ‘life options’. The experience of the Belgium time credit scheme does not bode well in this regard. The time credit scheme allowed people a limited amount of paid time away from work, for any purpose. It was a seemingly gender-neutral scheme. However, it has seen extremely gendered use in practice. Mothers (but not fathers) in Belgium have overwhelmingly used their time credit account to care for children, in effect as an extension of parenting leave (Deven & Merla, 2019). Perhaps another example is the completely gender-neutral parental leave in Sweden: despite there being individual parallel rights for two parents, gendered practice endures, with women using the lion’s share of leave. These experiences suggest that for a basic income to have an impact on the gendered practices of parenting, further thought would have to be given to how to achieve that specific goal. Gender equality is not a primary aim of a basic income, but it is a hoped for secondary consequence. Parental leave scholarship suggests that gender equality is most efficiently a consequence when it is an explicit policy aim, but that, as described above, even then it might fail to materialise.

Perhaps considering the distinction between gender equality and gender equity is helpful here. Gender equity is the value-laden concept that stems from the socially constructed expectations of female and male behaviour, which is based both on gender stratification and gender roles (Fraser, 1994). Gender equity is thus based on the experience of fairness and whose values are valuable, whereas gender equality would be easier defined by quantitative measures of gendered division of time and rewards of paid and unpaid work. Fraser (1994) would say that gender equality depends on female behaviour becoming the norm. Basic income has the potential to change the meaning of gender equity, either reversing back towards traditional gendered expectations,

or alternatively liberating us from such stratifications and norms that limit our behaviour. There are many factors in hypothesising such outcomes, but it seems clear that a basic income set at too low a payment rate would reverse development by necessity.

Firestone (1970, p. 1) observed that:

Sex class is so deep as to be invisible...the reaction of the common man, woman, and child—That? Why you can’t change that!...This gut reaction, the assumption about changing a fundamental biological condition, is an honest one....That so profound a change cannot be easily fit into traditional categories of thought, e.g., “political,” is not because these categories do not apply but because they are not big enough: radical feminism bursts through them.

As with other big political movements, the basic income project does not appear to be ‘big enough’, remaining relatively conservative and essentialist with regard to its understanding of gender equalities. Perhaps it is precisely because a basic income would be such a revolutionary expansion of freedom, that this core unchallenged gender binary worldview is all the more disappointing. An independent source of income is a good start on the road to freedom, but, it is not a sufficient condition to challenge the persistent norms and prevailing gendered structures. To the extent that gender is based on norms and structures, which have to be challenged, basic income, as a gender-neutral idea that hides gender, could be argued to be a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition to see female behaviour becoming the norm, thus leading us towards gender equality (Fraser, 1994).

4. The Social Organisation of Parenting and Gender Equality: Swedish Parental Leave Policy

Scholars and policy makers with an interest in how gender equality might be achieved have long observed that the social organisation of parenting and other care is the likely key (e.g., Firestone, 1970; Fraser, 1994; Koslowski, 2008). As long as a majority of mothers retain responsibility as a primary carer and a majority of fathers retain responsibility as a primary provider, this gendered split in the organisation of parenting is likely to spill over into gender inequalities across the life course. There is development over time, sometimes referred to as the (incomplete) gender revolution (Gerson, 2009), where Sweden is cast as a forerunner (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). Indeed, Sweden is often considered one of the best places in the world to be a mother. However, also in Sweden, gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work remain.

Whilst there is work to do before gender equality is fully realised in Sweden, its family policies have certainly led to high levels of female labour force participation, if also high levels of occupational sex segregation (Charles & Grusky, 2004). Historically, as elsewhere,

Swedish mothers had been expected to withdraw from the labour market after the birth of a child (which is no longer the case). Parental leave has been a key institution in the fight against discrimination; and it became a new norm that mothers return to the workplace after a period of parental leave. However, where mothers, and not so much fathers, are the ones using family friendly policies such as parental leave, this is likely to have adverse consequences for women's earning capacities (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005).

Sweden is a pioneer of parental leave, expanding leave rights to fathers, in place now since 1974 (Cedstrand, 2011). Proponents of parenting leave policies typically support the idea that gender equality requires a change away from the assumption that mothers have primary responsibility for childcare. Seen in this light, parenting leave in a broad sense goes along the same lines as basic income, proposing freedom in what tasks are performed and by whom. The Swedish state perceives the continued lack of equity between mothers and fathers in leave taking as problematic and employs reserved months to each parent as an instrument to increase take up by fathers. This emphasis on supporting men as well as women with parental care work has led to changing norms, and it is today clearly normative for fathers to take part of the parental leave, something 9 out of 10 fathers do. Also, most men and women adhere to the idea of gender equal sharing of leave (Valarino, 2019), suggesting a trend towards female behaviour been seen as a 'norm', as noted above, necessary for gender equality (Fraser, 1994). Among parents living apart, shared residential custody is now increasingly common, seeing far more involvement by fathers in childcare than in many comparable countries. The language used in policy is now overwhelmingly gender-neutral emphasising both parents' equal importance, but with the potential to also hide remaining gendered behaviour.

The Swedish state can be said to have been particularly proactive, or 'hands on' in implementing structural changes before—and with the explicit aim—of changing gendered parenting practices. Indeed, Sweden is used as an illustration of how the state can change deeply rooted gendered ideologies (and norms) over time (Mandel, 2009). However, the extent to which the state should 'nudge' behaviour and intervene is debated in Sweden. A basic income may be seen as complementing a more 'hands off' approach.

It is also interesting to note that equal leave taking is not evenly distributed across socio-economic status: the fathers most likely to be using extensive lengths of parental leave in Sweden are highly educated and with high incomes (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). So, the social organisation of parenting is most gendered for those most likely to benefit from a basic income, who are also those most dependent on the availability of high quality and affordable early years education and care. Sweden has also been a pioneer in the availability of high quality and affordable early years education and care (ECEC),

a service highly correlated with female labour market participation, which is well integrated with leave policy (Viklund & Duvander, 2017).

Parental leave payment in Sweden is approximately 80% of the wage for most parents. This might not necessarily be affected, in principle, by the implementation of a basic income, which could allow for the possibility of differences in levels of payments for different groups (e.g., such as fathers). Indeed, although mostly dependent on eligibility criteria linked to employment (given the universal worker model) parenting leave has been seen as one of a group of measures (another being a universal state pension) moving along the path to a basic income (Robeyns, 2001). However, as mentioned above, payment is only one dimension of parenting leave policy. In addition, it protects women's (and increasingly men's) position in the labour market, allowing them to return to their place of employment after a period of leave and it explicitly aims to support carers other than the birth mother, in particular encouraging increased care by fathers. A recent government commission on parental leave seeks to include also other carers in parental leave use, to better enable less traditional families (SOU, 2017).

Another aspect of current Swedish policies such as leave measures is that these types of benefits take account of specific needs at a given time as they arise (O'Reilly, 2008). This takes the risk away from the individual needing to plan ahead for a rainy day when care is required due to illness of a spouse or other family member; or for a more happy event, such as the birth of a child. As parental leave in Sweden is part of the national social insurance, it is based on the general idea of spreading risks over the population and the life course. It is an interesting question whether an individual payment of a basic income would shift such risk management back to the individual.

Sweden is known to be a particularly normative society, in that it is perhaps more difficult than in less normative societies (all societies are normative to some extent) to live outside the accepted 'best practice' norms. This currently shows up for those outside the normative universal worker model. Would a basic income exacerbate this existing social divide between those remaining on a low level of income and those on more average or higher levels of income? Would it create a two-tier system: a 'them and us' of lower income groups reliant on basic income and top up benefits and the higher income groups (who possibly resent paying for it all whilst having less 'free' time)?

So, the Swedish 'universal worker' model, or 'work line', which is such a core principle of many policies which are generally agreed to support gender equality, is possibly going to rub along as an awkward partner with a basic income. There seems to be a fundamental ideological conflict between the two ideas, a conflict much deeper than economic considerations of state budget, often expressed in the 'right to work' and also to mean-

ingful work, not least by the trade unions, which may undermine the universal worker model, bringing its existence into question. If the universal worker model did not continue to hold firm, this would likely undermine related efforts to reduce gender inequalities. Sweden is a good case indicating that structural interventions based around a universal worker model are needed to reduce gender inequalities still today and probably far into the future.

It is not clear that a basic income payment would challenge gender inequalities. Indeed, it may reinforce a (male) breadwinner model even in a country like Sweden where norms are clearly moving towards gender equal sharing; the gender wage gap would likely prevail, and we may see a tendency towards women (in particular mothers) quitting labour market work in favour of living on a basic income.

5. Conclusions: Basic Income, a Radical or Conservative Policy with Regard to Gendered Empowerment?

A basic income promises ‘real freedom’, or a freedom from dictate; what role then for state intervention? The interplay between social policies and norms is of key interest to social scientists and policy makers. This is particularly clear in the arena of public health, in which the interventionist state often plays a strong role in changing our behaviours, for e.g., with regard to smoking, alcohol consumption, vaccinations, sugar consumption. There are other examples around environmental behaviours too, e.g. recycling and reduced use of plastic bags and other plastics.

Should the state not take action too with regard to gender equalities? Norms will develop: there is no such thing as total ‘real’ freedom. Legal frameworks however, such as parental leave policies can see changes to norms, even those as deeply embedded as parenting practices. In Sweden, such statements are hardly controversial, but choice and gender equality are sometimes contrasted, and the limits to state intervention are constantly renegotiated.

Basic income would potentially change the boundaries for state intervention, which for many sounds intuitively positive, and may well bring many benefits. However, if the state does not intervene regarding gender-equality, gender norms will be determined by other less visible forces, such as the power dynamics within households. It is likely that a universal basic income has the potential for empowerment for all, but for this to be achieved, attention will need to be paid to its potential for gendered outcomes.

The concerns raised here regarding the limitations of empowerment for women from a basic income—particularly with regard to whom remains holding the baby, doing the majority of domestic work and the majority of both formal and informal care work—are not in themselves arguments against the implementation of a basic income. However, there are certainly strong rea-

sons to not let basic income replace other structures that have been shown to be relevant for gender equality, in particular the ones directed at supporting families, such as parental leave and childcare services.

McLean (2015, p. 2) notes that ‘basic Income is in some ways a microcosm of wider feminist controversies regarding how the state can recognise the unpaid work women largely do without reinforcing existing inequalities, also known as Wollstonecraft’s Dilemma (Lister, 1995; Pateman, 1988)’. Indeed, feminists involved with policy making sometimes find themselves falling into one of two camps: that of a more pragmatic approach and that of a more idealistic approach. The former aim to take the situation they see at a current time in front of them, such as mothers doing most of the childcare, and to support women in that situation. The latter might rather take issue with the root imbalance of this situation and aim to create a new situation where fathers are doing more childcare. Arguably, many aspects of the current Swedish welfare state are more radically ambitious than the idea of basic income in that it seeks change to the gendered division of both paid and unpaid work. The implementation of a basic income would be gender-neutral and so, in theory, fathers and mothers would have the same support. In practice, however, and especially given the likely low level of basic income, this policy might have the (unintended) consequence of encouraging a return to the breadwinner model of parenting, with one parent better able to stay at home, but another parent still needing to remain firmly attached to the labour market. Once again, we have a political movement, which has not fully embraced the challenge from radical feminism to move us beyond the ‘fundamental biological condition’ as observed by Shulamith Firestone (1970, p. 1) towards an equal distribution of care work.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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