

BASIC INCOME STUDIES
An International Journal of Basic Income Research

Vol. 3, Issue 3

RESEARCH NOTE

December 2008

Debate: "Should Feminists Endorse Basic Income?"

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Basic Income, Gender Justice and the Costs
of Gender-Symmetrical Lifestyles*

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Abstract – I argue that, in the currently gender-unjust societies a basic income would not advance feminist goals. To assess the impact of a social policy on gender justice I propose the following criterion: a society is gender-just when the costs of engaging in a lifestyle characterized by gender-symmetry (in both the domestic and public spheres) are, for both men and women, smaller or equal to the costs of engaging in a gender-asymmetrical lifestyle. For a significant number of women, a basic income would increase the costs of leading gender-symmetrical lifestyles because it would make it easier for both women and men to pursue gender-unjust preferences. I argue that preference satisfaction is distinct from justice. I conclude by showing why a basic income would lead to further privatisation of caregiving, and I outline the negative effects this would have on women.

Keywords – basic income, care, gender justice, privatisation, symmetrical lifestyles

* I am grateful to several people who gave me helpful feedback on various drafts of this essay: David Casassas, Jurgen De Wispelaere, Ingrid Robeyns, an anonymous reviewer of *Basic Income Studies* and the participants in a one-day workshop on basic income and gender held at the Chaire Hoover d'éthique économique et sociale, Université Catholique de Louvain in November, 2006. A grant from the International Federation of University Women made possible a research stay in Oxford, during which I wrote this final version.

Societies worldwide are characterized by significant gaps between women and men with respect to political, economic and educational achievements, and by a division of labour – paid and unpaid – which is most often deeply gendered. Additionally, women and femininity are culturally devalued, and this devaluation is deeply rooted at the level of individual psychology. Should the introduction of a basic income (BI) be welcomed by feminists as an emancipation force in women's lives and in the relations between genders? Would it ultimately promote gender justice? There is a *prima facie* reason to believe that the introduction of *any* redistributive scheme, hence also of a BI, would benefit women, and would redress at least some of the economic injustices connected to gender. But there are also reasons to worry that such a policy will have unintended consequences such as the worsening of women's access to the market, the confinement of at least some women to domesticity to a higher degree than it is currently the case in most Western countries and, ultimately, the perpetuation of unjust gender norms and expectations. Overall, I argue that, given the currently existing gender injustice, feminists should be wary of the introduction of a BI. At best, they should see it as a complement to other institutions of the welfare state (for arguments in favour of the latter position see Lister, 1995; Robeyns, 2001).

1. Gender-Symmetrical Lifestyles as a Criterion of Gender Justice

To judge the degree to which a policy promotes gender justice,¹ I suggest an operational definition of “gender justice” based on an ideal of gender-symmetrical lifestyles:

A society is gender just when the costs of engaging in a lifestyle characterized by gender-symmetry (both in the domestic and in the public sphere) are, for both men and women, less or equal to the costs of engaging in a lifestyle that is gender asymmetrical.

A gender-symmetrical lifestyle is one in which women and men engage equally in paid work and family life, which includes unpaid care work for dependants. I start from the assumption that work and family are the central concerns of most people's lives, if we understand these as the following: “work”

¹ I do not discuss here whether a gender-just society is the same as providing “what is good for women” in terms of satisfying their actual preferences. Such a society may not optimally satisfy many preferences of contemporary women, formed against a background of unjust social arrangements. What is good for a person in an unjust context – particularly if the injustices are historic and systematic – is not necessarily what justice requires.

includes market and nonmarket activities that are productive of goods or services, and “family” includes various long-term living arrangements based on emotional attachments typically involving extended periods of dependency related to child care, old age, illness and sometimes life-long disabilities. It is reasonable to expect that, in order to lead fulfilling lives, the majority of people will need ample opportunities to thrive in both their working and their family lives. Hence, just social arrangements should make “work *and* family” the default position and should minimize the costs of choosing this situation, for both men and women, relative to either the *work only* or *family only* situation. An additional argument in favour of gender-symmetrical lifestyles is to be found in the feminist literature, which argues that caregiving should be recognized as a universal duty of citizenship (Bubeck, 1999; Kittay, 1999). Introducing a BI would be compatible with gender justice and possibly beneficial for justice, all things considered, only if it does not raise the costs of engaging in gender-symmetrical lifestyles.

But we have reasons to believe that a BI is likely, in the long run, to raise the costs of gender-symmetrical lifestyles. I rely on already developed arguments indicating that, should a BI be introduced, it would be reasonable to expect an overall drop in female labour (Kesenne, 1990; Robeyns, 2001; Bergmann, 2004); differing income effects for different groups of women (Robeyns, 2001); and a drop in women's bargaining power within the household, decreased self-esteem and loss of social capital (Robeyns, 2001). Additionally, work on women's preferences and behaviour with respect to combining home and career in the context of public policies suggests that a BI would increase the polarization between home-centred and work-centred women (Hakim, 2000).

Research by Catherine Hakim shows that if cash is provided instead of services (for example, home care allowances instead of services such as childcare), female preference patterns become more polarized: more women become either career-oriented or home-oriented and fewer try to adapt in order to combine home and career (Hakim, 2000).² Suppose, based on the similarities between a BI and the open-ended (cash) benefits discussed by Hakim, that the introduction of a BI would lead to more polarization of women's lifestyle preferences. The group of adaptive women would shrink, and there would be less incentive for adapting policies that make the costs of gender-symmetrical lifestyles the cheapest option for both men and women.

² Hakim's studies reveal that women who have a strong career orientation are unlikely to change it in response to distributive policies. By contrast, adaptive women – i.e., women who do their best to combine homemaking and career, giving them different weight over time – are very responsive to distributive policies: cash payments tend to encourage them to withdraw from the labour market more than do care services.

2. Entrenching Gendered Preferences

Advocating gender-symmetry as a default position raises the concern that, even under the conditions of increased gender justice, some women have a constant preference for being homemakers (Hakim, 2004, estimates that this is about a fifth of the UK's female population). Hakim's normative conclusion is that the best policies would give equal support to both categories of women, to those who are home-centred as well as to those who are career-centred. Leaving aside the question of whether it is at all possible to have policy packages that are neutral in this respect, there are principled reasons for rejecting Hakim's conclusion. Responding to preferences need not be the same as promoting justice. First, many preferences are adaptive, and since women's preferences are historically shaped against a background of injustice we have good reasons not to take them at face value. Second, Hakim treats women's preferences as if they were independent of men's preferences. But they are unlikely to be so: men and women work together and raise families together. If men were more home-centred and adaptive, this would have an impact on all three categories of women discussed by Hakim. The career-centred women would find it easier to find partners willing to participate in raising a family, adaptive women would have more support in their endeavors of combining home and work, and there is evidence that even home-centred women would be better off as they would be more likely to remain in their marriages (Hochschild, 2003.) Most importantly, the preference-formation for women growing up in a world where, for both men and women, the default lifestyle is that they shoulder equally the burdens (and reap equally the benefits) of both work and home would be different than it currently is. In consequence, instead of responding to women's current preferences, we should aim to ensure that preferences (of all individuals) are formed under just circumstances³. One of the deeply unjust circumstances of the current world is the devaluation of care.

In spite of sending the message that one's social value should not be entirely dependent on whether or not one holds paid employment, introducing a BI would lead to further public devaluation of care-based lifestyles. It has already been argued that a BI would result in improvements with respect to the ability to choose between paid and unpaid work, as well as between different types of work (Robeyns, 2001). This consequence, welcome in a world where men and women have equal bargaining powers and where preferences are formed under

³ Which is not to suggest that, even under just circumstances, satisfying preferences will necessarily mean the same thing as doing justice.

structurally just circumstances, would in fact perpetuate the traditional gendered division of labour resulting (as already mentioned) in a drop of women's participation in paid work. A BI would, all things being equal, lower the costs for individuals to pursue their preferences. It is precisely this feature – which makes it attractive to liberals (and, of course, to libertarians) – that should worry feminists. As long as most men will resent doing care work as demeaning, tedious, and unimportant, or otherwise regard it a threat to their masculinities, a BI will also perpetuate the devaluation of care. Thus, given the pressure that social environments put on individuals, for the more gender conservative groups the existence of a BI would raise the costs for individuals (of both sexes) to engage in gender-symmetrical lifestyles. Moreover, gender-unjust norms would be more deeply entrenched – and here comes my next argument.

3. The Increased Privatization of Care

If a BI will lead, as some critics fear, to a serious shortage of labour supply in the caring professions, *care might become increasingly (re)privatized*. Given current cultural norms, it is likely that women will be expected to shoulder the burden of private care, especially if they will indeed gradually be more excluded from the market. The privatization of care and the confinement of more women to domesticity fare badly for gender justice for a number of reasons. Economically, women will lose skills and social capital, making their re-entry in the market increasingly difficult – ultimately, many will have no substantive exit right from domesticity. Socially and culturally, the privatization of care may lead to the perpetuation of domestic violence and gender stereotypes. Psychologically, all blame for bad care will (continue to) go to women and this, in turn, will perpetuate the misrecognition of women. A general consequence of the privatization of care will be that the economic, social and psychological costs of individuals engaging in gender-symmetrical lifestyles will become increasingly higher.

It is important to emphasize that the costs of leading a particular lifestyle are economical but also psychological. Social expectations, together with one's own internalized expectations, as well as even more elusive factors such as people's ability to respect women and whatever is associated with the “feminine,” carry the imprints of and perpetuate gender injustice. A discussion of BI's effects on gender justice will benefit from feminist psychology theories that locate the origins of women's misrecognition in the traditional social arrangements – in particular the feminisation of child care – and their valuation and representation,

which structure our earliest human interaction, our moral emotions and our ability to value women and the feminine (Benjamin, 1988). Feminist theorists have shown how the feminisation of childrearing combined with the generally low status and social powerlessness of women is at the root of women's misrecognition (Ruddick, 1989). Far from being a merely individual choice devoid of any social implication, women's domesticity, particularly when work and family conflict structurally, is a significant symptom and future cause of gender injustice (Williams, 2000).

If many women drop out of the labour market and care becomes more privatised, this will generate self-perpetuating spirals of gender discrimination. A BI would eliminate the economic dependence that spouses with precarious careers would have on their working partner. Such dependence is one of the main incentives women currently have against centering their lives on marriage and (domestic) caregiving. If some women would continue to be expected to marry and center their lives around care-giving, and this choice would be perceived as less risky than it is now, some parents would have incentive to invest more resources in furthering the careers of boys.

4. Conclusion

With current gender norms and expectations in place, introducing a BI would, in the long run, reinforce gender injustice. Therefore, this policy could be consistent with gender justice only if other mechanisms would successfully offset its negative consequences. To ease the conflict between work and family we need generous levels of different types of redistribution, in particular, socialized child care; care for the ill, elderly and disabled; and policies to encourage men to get involved in the *second shift* (Hochschild, 2003). Such distributive models, called "the double-earner-double-carer model" or "the universal care-giver model," were sketched by Fraser (1994) and developed by Gornick and Mayers (2003). They assume, as a norm, that individuals' lives are shared between career and caring, including obligations towards dependents over significant periods. Hence they include provisions for paid leaves, for the socialization of care in

public institutions as well as for labour regulations that allow flexibility without significant loss of career opportunities.⁴

A BI would increase the gap between those leading gender-symmetrical lifestyles and gender traditionalists, and thus its introduction without appropriate measures to eliminate or reduce this gap would be adverse to gender justice. However, although there are reasons to think that in the world as it is a BI would be an obstacle to gender justice, in a world largely characterized by gender-just norms and expectations, BI's introduction could still be welcomed by liberal feminists. In the most optimistic scenario, given the right institutional setup and changes of individual preferences, a universal BI might advance *liberal* justice by giving people a decent option to *avoid* gender symmetry if they wish to. Thus, a BI could ease the inherent tension between gender justice (as defined in this note) and liberal justice.

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⁴ As many feminists have argued, a necessary step in achieving gender justice is to change men's gendered preferences. To undo the sources of gender injustice at the level of individual psychology and at the symbolic level of cultural representations, it is necessary to focus on the things that men are losing out under the current arrangements. If it is true that for many women the choice between advancing their career and spending quality time with their dependents and other loved ones is painful, why not suppose that masculinity norms requiring men to spend most of their adulthood working are also oppressive? At a superficial glance one may miss this, since most men can focus on their career *and* have a family that is shouldered largely by their partner, who either is not working or is working part-time. However, being able to spend quality time with one's family is a core value – and not the mere fact of "having" loved ones at home. Men are losing out significantly by conforming to cultural and market expectations.

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