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*Debate: "Should Feminists Endorse Basic Income?"*  
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## Introduction: Revisiting the Feminism and Basic Income Debate\*

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In this issue of *Basic Income Studies*, six philosophers and social scientists answer the question of whether, all things considered, feminists should embrace basic income. Basic income proposals have always had strong defenders and critics among feminists. Some feminists have argued that basic income will finally deliver the long-awaited recognition of unpaid work and caregiving, work that is primarily performed by women. Other feminists have worried that a basic income would function as hush money, discouraging women from striving for more far-reaching gender equality.

Both views are *prima facie* plausible. Both views have also been defended in the growing body of gender analyses published in the last decades. The first published views by basic income advocates stated that basic income was a good thing for women: unpaid work would be socially recognised, women's autonomy would be strengthened, women's bargaining position within the household would improve, and men would be encouraged to share more in the

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domestic work (Walter, 1989; Standing, 1992; Jordan, 1998). Hermione Parker's (1993) gender analysis was much more qualified, as she argued that a basic income holds more advantages for British women not because it structurally favours women over men, but because the existing social security system benefited men. Yet she added that a basic income was not enough, and that equal opportunities and equal wages were crucially important. Ailsa McKay (2001, 2005) developed a justification for basic income starting from a feminist economic perspective. In contrast to most existing social security systems, we need a welfare state that does not prioritise income maintenance above other needs, such as those related to care work. Others have been more critical of the gender effects of basic income. I have argued that basic income "is beneficial for some women, bad for others, and ambiguous for most" (Robeyns, 2000, p. 135), yet that basic income cannot deliver gender justice since it will do nothing to destabilise the *traditional* gender division of labour; therefore additional measures are needed (Robeyns, 2001). Barbara Bergmann (2004) has been the most negative feminist critic of basic income, arguing that feminists should prioritise the state's provisioning of merit goods above a basic income, and that we can't have both.

Given the wide range of differing views defended in the literature, I was curious whether there would be greater consensus by now on the desirability of basic income from a feminist perspective. Thus arose the idea to invite six experts on either basic income or gender and social policy to argue whether or not feminists have good reasons to endorse basic income. Apart from Barbara Bergmann, the precise views of the other contributors were unknown to me.<sup>1</sup>

When I received the essays, I was surprised to discover that the views about the desirability of basic income for feminists are as wide-ranging and conflicting as ever. Julieta Elgarte (2008, p. 3) argues that "by decoupling benefit entitlement from paid work, a basic income is effectively able to provide life-long income security to homemakers and part-time or intermittent workers, thus meeting women's distinctive needs regarding income security." Elgarte believes that basic income could play a supportive role in the transition towards a society where the gendered divisions of labour could be abolished and full justice for women attained, by protecting homemakers without trapping them into the household, yet at the same time facilitating all couples to share paid and unpaid (care) work more equally by allowing them to interrupt their paid work or to

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<sup>1</sup> These contributions all focus on relatively affluent societies. Their analyses may or may not hold for poor societies. A gender analysis of basic income in poor societies is an important topic, which would be useful for the basic income literature to address in the near future.

work part-time without making the household income fall below a decent minimum. Yet in order for a basic income to lead to a reinforcement of the traditional gender division of labour, we need to simultaneously introduce a set of measures such as high-quality care services and a variety of parental leaves.

Yet according to Barbara Bergmann, we cannot have it all. She argues that we need to choose between a Swedish-style welfare state and a basic income, and that all the merit goods that are currently publicly provided for in Sweden – child care, schooling, health care, free or partially subsidised higher education, mental health care, decent housing, public transportation and social work services – as well as targeted cash payments to those in need and in special circumstances, amount to 60% of Swedish GDP. Thus, it is impossible to add a universal basic income to this list. Bergmann argues that, for feminists, it is not desirable to drop all these services in order to replace them by a universal cash transfer. A basic income will not guarantee us any of these merit goods, and it may not be high enough to buy them when provided by the market.

In their contributions, John Baker and Almaz Zelleke question the gender equality model that Bergmann endorses. Baker warns against a gender justice model that relies on full commodification of care and, relying on recent empirical work, he argues that “an attempt to address the gendered division of labour by externalising and commodifying care while pushing carers into paid employment runs against its members deeply ingrained understandings of human relationships and frustrates their needs for love and care” (Baker, 2008, p. 6). A feminist agenda must attack the gendered division of labour, but must also recognise the limits of the commodification of care, and thus support unpaid care work. In Baker’s opinion, basic income can contribute to such a feminist agenda, yet we also need to change the ideological belief that doing the care work is a woman’s role.

Zelleke shares Baker’s views on the contribution of basic income to recognising the importance of care. Yet in contrast to some other contributors, she holds that a basic income would do so “without reinforcing the existing gendered distribution of labor” (Zelleke, 2008, p. 5). She argues that “An unconditional basic income and reducing the dependency of the caregiving partner on the employed partner for income, benefits, and status should encourage both men and women to combine both roles – worker and caregiver – either simultaneously or in turn” (2008, p. 6). Moreover, basic income is most likely to eliminate poverty among the most vulnerable groups in society – single mothers and their children – and this, for any feminist, should be a strong argument in favour of basic income.

Jacqueline O'Reilly and Anca Gheaus are less optimistic about the positive contributions of basic income to the feminist cause. Gheaus proposes that in order to judge to what extent a policy promotes gender justice, we should assess whether the costs of engaging in a lifestyle characterised by gender symmetry would be smaller than or equal to the costs of engaging in a gender asymmetrical lifestyle. She argues that basic income will raise the costs of gender-symmetric lifestyles. Rather than giving equal support to home- and career-centred women and accepting their preferences at face value, we should "aim to ensure that preferences (of all individuals) are formed under just circumstances" (2008, p. 4). One such deeply unjust circumstance is the devaluation of care; therefore, in the world as it is, a basic income would be an obstacle to gender justice. O'Reilly adds further critical notes to the effects of a basic income when implemented in the real world. She surveys the gender effects of existing social policies and concludes that she is "sceptical that BI could radically address all the causes of gender inequality" (2008, p. 2). The feminist struggle requires a clear spelling out of what kind of gender equality we want and an acknowledgement of the complexity of the multiple dimensions of gender equality.

So what can we conclude from this wide array of views? I would suggest that an in-depth feminist case for or against basic income requires considerable additional information other than just the claim that an unconditional basic income will be provided as a citizenship right. First, we need to be more specific about the level of basic income, since different levels of basic income may plausibly have different effects on the gendered distributions of income, labour market participation, and the intra-household divisions of caregiving. Second, we also need information on whether or not child care provisions and provisions for others who are dependent on family care would remain intact or would be expanded in the basic income society, and on what other measures will be implemented to create the flexibility that employed carers need. Third, empirical information about the likely effects on the well-being and the material standard of living of various groups (children, women, men, employed and unemployed adults, employed and nonemployed carers, single parents, dual parents, and so forth) needs to be collected. If we argue as several contributors to this debate do that a basic income would need to be complemented with other measures that redistribute care and unpaid work between women and men, we need to know more precisely what these measures are, their effectiveness, and their public and private costs.

These feminist discussions do need to be integrated into the mainstream basic income debate. After all, once a basic income is implemented it may be too

late to notice that it adversely affects the gender division of labour and thus women's position in society, or too late to notice that there is no money left to spend on the merit goods of special importance to women and children. To my mind, the main merit of this debate in *Basic Income Studies* is that it provides evidence of the consolidation of the conflicting feminist views about basic income proposals when analysed at a general level. Therefore, I believe that it is time to move to a second stage of feminist analyses that needs to focus more on the details of the entire package deal of a basic income society, in an empirically grounded fashion.

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