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Gender Inequality, Social Reproduction and the Universal Basic Income

Lorena Lombardozi

Abstract

Despite extensive attention being paid to the effects of the Universal Basic Income (UBI) on society at large, little critical analysis has been developed on the relationship between gender inequality and UBI. The purpose of this article is to first reflect on the feminist arguments in favour of UBI and then problematises some of these points by also reflecting on 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, policymakers 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

1. 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, socio-economic status or productive and reproductive capacity. Recently, UBI has triggered enormous attention and support across different political and theoretical fronts, including liberal, green, populist and democratic socialists. The imperative to place gender front and centre of future political, economic, and policy considerations, specifically with regards to how the UBI relates to the consequences of the recent politics of neoliberal austerity and a wider history of the restructuring of the relationship between women, work and welfare.

With the rise of modern capitalism, pro-worker legislation 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 taking care of food preparation, cleaning, childcare, elderly care etc. However, in the post-war period, the feminist movements, with the support of social democratic parties, promoted and obtained the development of the welfare state which established public services provision for childcare, elderly care, and pensions. As a result, women were partially relieved from reproductive work and their increased participation in the formal labour market fulfilled women's intellectual, economic and social aspirations.

Yet, such progressive trends did not last. Neoliberalism reconfigured social relations in ways that eroded women's material and socio-political emancipations. Women's engagement in paid work soon became less of a choice and more of a necessity because male wages were not enough to maintain decent household living standards. Women are often the first to be fired, and subject to precarious contracts and part-time work.¹ Also, women in low socio-economic status, from minority backgrounds or in non-heteronormative relationships are often the most exposed victims of the costs of this material crisis paying with less work, low pay or, worse, no job at all.²

The neoliberal model also dismantled social protections and benefits in favour of privatisation of care services and means-testing social security.³ The de-financing of the welfare state has contributed to the transfer of those domestic tasks 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 was translated in various forms and venues: from the multiplication of private nursery and elderly care agencies to the proliferation of ready-to-eat meals and take-away platforms. Furthermore, an increasing amount of reproductive labour is performed largely by migrant populations and women of colour. The inability 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 of time poverty which hampers their possibility of socio-economic mobility, wellbeing and, ultimately, political participation.

These worsening conditions of the three dimensions of care, work and welfare reflect the gendered crisis of neoliberalism. The lack of collective means through which to secure life's necessities and reproduce living conditions is exemplified by the overwhelming commodification of such means. In this marketized context it is not a coincidence that atomistic and monetised policy solutions have become popular across the whole political spectrum, one of which is UBI – the focus of this article.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section I systematise the arguments advocating for the positive effects of UBI on women and social reproductive work. In section 3 I will discuss the limitations of those arguments and reflect on the under-investigated tensions these have missed. Section 4 will conclude by putting forward relevant questions which untangle the case for a structural reform of the socio-economic structure of the economy.

2. The gender case for UBI

Although being the object of a contested debate, UBI has been supported by feminists from both socialist and liberal perspectives. Many different arguments have been put forward. It has been argued that UBI is an emancipatory policy which is able to promote human rights and even-up power relationships 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, providing space to deal with the insecurity of society, 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 correct the productivist bias toward certain kinds of work on which the welfare system is based. From this perspective domestic work is a central element of the capitalist mode of production, situating women in a condition of exploitation in the household thereby forcing 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 they were demanding to extend wages to any form of work. UBI is a natural upgrading of these initiatives. In other words, commodifying non-labour (unpaid) and decommodifying productive labour is perceived as a way to enable alternative forms of social relation which differ from those of the traditional capitalist labour market.⁷ So a central contribution of any possible UBI format is its ability to recalibrate this essential but un-commoditised form of work, through which human beings are cared for and nurtured. Eliminating the penalty women face for the unpaid character of the socially reproductive labour they perform would enable women to renegotiate the hidden value of unpaid work in society 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 and 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 therefore can 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 overcoming a tax benefit system based on households and focus on the individual instead. Also, it 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 claimed also that UBI would be able to reach out people at the margin, where the welfare state is often found wanting, 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 inter-dependencies and invent newer healthier ones both at the level of the household and the state.¹⁰

3. 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 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, Bhattacharya 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 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 focusing on the sphere of reproductive work and the gendered division of labour that circumscribes it, a social reproduction approach problematises 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 with¹⁴.

Yet, whilst Marxist-feminists taking a social reproduction standpoint have been central in popularizing 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 still possessed 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 less and smaller pensions and social insurance. Therefore, welfare benefits and public services have to be accessed through the husband.¹⁷ Yet, this institutionalised disadvantage is unlikely to be substantially challenged by the implementation of the UBI, which risks deepening the dependence on men for income and 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 with respect to social, political and economic arenas. 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.

This indicates how the most common shortfall of analyses of the effect of UBI on women thus far are their static approach. Put in another way, it is observable that there exists a generalised lack of understanding of the dynamic consequences of UBI. We lack an analysis that, for instance, would assess comprehensively the inter-generational consequences of UBI in the long-run. UBI may create incremental changes in a time of crisis like the one we are currently living but can also smooth out and anesthetise any short-term shocks it contributes to create. As an example, UBI can relieve pressure from gendered poverty in the immediate term. However, if the sources of such poverty, such as gender-based discrimination, wage gaps, an andro-centric welfare system, unequal care duties and lack of job opportunities persist and remain embedded in the dominant social relations of production and reproduction, the UBI will only amount to a short-term solution unable to transform the underlining causes of such poverty and unable to stop the current pervasive socio-economic disenfranchisement.

Furthermore, UBI runs the risk of amounting to little more than 'cash-in chips'. Rather than expanding women's bargaining power, it could divert the attention from the actual source of structural gender inequality. Instead of increasing women's freedom to say no, UBI, by watering-down the material complexities but also the social differences between work and labour, could reduce women's political space for claiming back their rights to self-determinations and dismantle the constraints in which women operate and resist. This is not to downplay the urgency in addressing social and economic injustice, but rather recognises the need to focus our attention on equally probable risks that the implementation of the UBI can entail in terms of de-politicization of the causes and consequences of everlasting poverty. Last but not least, the entitlement to UBI will not automatically eliminate the sexist attitudes and norms that originated gender conflicts in the first place.¹⁸ In this sense, UBI could worsen poor women's wellbeing by exposing them to new dynamics of expropriation by men, as it has happened in situations where women start engaging with income earning opportunities and yet do not have full control of their spending decisions. Men could manage to even divert the funds allocated to women under UBI.

The neoliberal state, by replacing universal provision of social services with commoditized needs and services, has got rid of 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 monetization and individualization of the provision of such needs and services. As a result, while inequality and social injustice increase, a gendered crisis of care would be retained because women would be stuck within the same set of patriarchal-inspired duties on

domestic labour and care at precisely the point they have the least time and security in which to perform them. Unemployed women who sit at home not only will struggle to pay utility bills and will feel 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, proposals for a UBI claim that the measure will help delegitimise the inquisitorial system on which eligibility criteria for social benefits are scrutinised. However, the focus should be on the structure and processes through which those criteria are assessed rather than identifying UBI as the way out.

Many are studying possible policy alternatives. 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 likely to be continuous labour force participants, not inevitably destined to leave the workforce, and therefore as people worth training, putting into jobs leading to promotion, and then considering 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.

Universal Basic Services is also an appealing scheme²⁰. Proposed in 2017 as a revival to the objective of redistribution and collective responsibilities and cohesion of the 'old fashion' 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, 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-50s, 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 specific 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 universalizing scheme of the UBI. Indeed, even were we accept that the latter can do what it claims, UBI can only carry through on its potentially emancipatory promise when accompanied by more systematic interventions that match the complexity of work, life and wellbeing in contemporary capitalism. UBI will not create a directional system of incentive or disincentives 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 social infrastructure beyond payments and which reconfigure a social contract based on solidarity.

4. Conclusions

Women are increasingly integrated with the waged labour market but 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 will not be able to resolve it. UBI, because it would be still 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 inter-dependent to the other. Paid and unpaid work is subject to 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' organizations and the system of welfare and labour legislations need to work to overcome the structure of single wage households and develop more heterogeneous and fluid mechanisms of social protection and public goods that dissolve existing patriarchal social norms, redistribute unpaid work duties to men (i.e. shared parental leave), and tackle the regulatory black hole on non-heteronormative settings without enabling conditions of segregation.

Governments do have the tools to regulate and deconstruct social relations with targeted policies and create the necessary institutions which reflects the social heterogeneity we live in. Policymakers should embrace those tensions and develop targeted policy solutions in order to realise inclusive social objectives able to be potentially 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 three separate dimensions reinforce the need to redefine and transform *work*

and the system of welfare built around it. Unfortunately, neither UBI nor any form of cash transfer would help this difficult process.

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