

Through the lens of feminism. Basic income from a feminist perspective (FRIBIS Team UBI & Gender)

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The question of gender is one of many perspectives in a broader view of Basic Income and inequality. But, that doesn't mean it shouldn't be studied as one of the central issues in the Basic Income debate. In this paper I want to argue for a feminist based approach for Basic Income and what further implications for policy, research and activism arise from the feminist perspective.

First, it is important to elaborate on the nature of the feminist perspective we take as a team. Our approach for Basic Income is discussed from an intersectional feminism, from women to structural gendered and other forms of oppression, i.e. class, race, disability, and sexual orientation.

Is there a gender blindness in the Basic Income discourse?

While there are existing studies to show inequalities between men and women over the world, a fewer exist for Basic Income as a potential intervention to raise equality between women and men. With the Covid-19 crisis since 2020, we can see the value of the necessity of equality in care-work, which in our society is an unpaid as well as lower valued work, centered in the private sphere and mostly done by women. Halpenny and Carrier summarize: "The impacts of Covid-19 have not been gender-neutral." (Halpenny, Carrier, 2020:1)

A study by Barnett and Baruch (1985) about Women's Involvement in multiple roles and psychological distress showed that women are often and more than man in a constant role strain (Goode, 1960), meaning that they are in a state of overload and conflict between their multiple roles as paid workers, wife's, mothers, daughters, etc... and demands within these roles.

"Role conflict arises when the demands from two or more roles are such that adequate performance of one role jeopardizes adequate performance of the other(s)." (Barnett, Baruch, 1985: 136)

These role conflicts not only lead to worse performances, they're more importantly forcing women in these situations in a constant state of psychological stress, a form of psychological scarcity, where they feel less competent and less autonomous. Because these "roles differ in social value and in the patterning of privileges and obligations associated with them" (Barnett, Baruch, 1985: 135), we have a gendered division of labour, where women especially, even if they have a paid employment aren't given the freedom and independence to actually live their life's in a self-sufficient way. Women take on most of the family work. They take time off from work for their children and families and returning to work is very difficult and usually only offers a part-time position.

Covid-19 has made visible again the domestic structures in which we still live. And these domestic structures also affect a larger context of society which doesn't only focusses on women but on all socially disadvantaged, not fulfilling the predetermined role economy and society assigns them. Yet, these problems aren't prioritized in the discussions around Basic Income.

Women and Work

While a Basic Income wouldn't be a cure-all intervention for inequality, it would as a first and sufficient measure give the possibility for minimum economic participation as well as financial safety-net erasing problems as the feminization of poverty - the increasing tendency to for those in poverty to be primarily women and their children - and social stigmatization that comes with it.

On the example of Germany, the risk of living in poverty is particularly high for single parents (41%) and even though parental leave now is also offered for men, 90% of parental leave months are still taken by mothers. (Data Report of the Federal Statistical Office, 2021)

How Women understand work – either as a form of freedom or a form of oppression or even both in their different roles – differs strongly depending on their personal situation. What is not different, however, is the clear disadvantage compared to men over the entire lifespan, which is demonstrated at the latest by the significantly higher risk of poverty in old age.

There are theoretical approaches, defining the feminist struggle as an anti-capitalistic or a class-struggle with work in the center of it. (See, for example: S. Ferguson (2020): *Women and Work. Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction.*) Pivotal for these approaches, often centered around social reproduction theory or social reproduction feminism is the integration of gender in the class struggle and vice versa: “social reproduction feminism directs our attention to the interaction between unpaid and paid labour, positioning these as different-but-equally-essential parts of the same overall (capitalist) system (Ferguson, 2020: 3). Describing work as a “lens through which we see the world”, S. Ferguson argues that for women this lens is a far smaller one since they “often work under difficult and degrading circumstances” (ibid.: 9).

Women’s Class Struggles and the History of International Women’s Day

As both the activism for gender equality as well as class equality are now theoretical interlaced, a further look on the history of International Women’s Day gives an idea of the practical interrelation of these concepts. Starting from the United States in 1909, feminists led by the Women’s Trade Union League, proclaimed a National Women’s Day to emphasize the need for women’s suffrage to offer a political voice for women working in factories. In Germany, probably the most famous activist is Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) who, inspired by the U.S. National Women’s Day led the women of the Second International, a socialist alliance, to call for an International Women’s Day. In the context of

women’s fight for civil rights demanding changes in family law, labor law, and political representation, the system of gender relations is part of a social order structured by intersectional power relations. Where the working class fights for equal participation in production, women in particular fight for their autonomy in production and reproduction. Within this doubled discourse the private sphere becomes political, calling for autonomy, self-determination, and solidarity in resistance to the paternalistic state.

Today International Women’s Day stands between a global networked activism for equality, especially in education and work, for example the demand for equal pay, and capitalist commercialization. But what can we learn from its origin of this struggle for equality of class and gender?

Before answering this question, I want to mention another example for this common history: The campaign against the “cohabitation rule” by the British claimant’s union in the 1970s. Prof. Dr. Toru Yamamori recently published an article based on his longstanding research, including interviews with members of the claimant’s union, where he outlines the discussed demand for an unconditional basic income within the British Women’s Liberation Movement. (Yamamori (2022): *The forgotten feminist history of universal basic income*) The “cohabitation rule” stated that “men and women who lived together are automatically treated as husband and wife” (Yamamori: 2022). In this logic women were always supported by men and their benefits were reduced or cancelled. Yamamori explains:

“If a women claimant had a sexual relationship with a man, it was assumed she would be supported by him. Sometimes just friendly, neighbourly activities, such as a male neighbour coming in to help fix a tap or a lightbulb, would be used as evidence of a partner or boyfriend and a woman would find that the next week her benefit was suspended.”

From these grassroots organizations, as the claimant’s unions with their demand for Basic Income were working class women, we can see how the organization of society and labour was gender-dividend and forcing women to the

domestic private sphere was politically and willingly organized as such.

The potential to transform society

Since equal opportunities to work aren't in the focus of the discussion anymore, although there are still a lot of inequalities, especially for disabled people, we're still facing enormous inequalities within the employment sphere, the biggest may be the Gender-pay-gap. In average, women in Germany still earn 18% less than men. (Data Report of the Federal Statistical Office, 2021) A Basic Income again, wouldn't be the cure-all solution, but at least women wouldn't be depending on work under these unequal conditions for financial independence and economic participation. Which would be one of the first key concepts for a definition for Basic Income from a feminist perspective.

From the History of International Women's Day in the beginning of the 1900's and from T. Yamamori's research of the British Liberation Movement in the 1970's we not only see how close gender and class struggles are connected, furthermore we can take from it how the shift in direction of a debate benefits both sides of the same struggle, or as Susan Ferguson would say: "...] to argue that feminist and worker struggles are two different party of the same class struggle." (Ferguson, 2020: 5). As a result, from these reflections I want to establish that feminist theory indeed directs the attention debate to the people who need an Unconditional Basic Income and again closing the argument with a quote from Ferguson regarding her mentioned book: "But it is about theory that is needed if we are to create a world which prioritizes meeting human needs for security, health, sustenance, and creativity before all else." (Ferguson, 2020: 7.f.)

Literaturverzeichnis

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