

Basic income and the gendered division of labour *

by Julieta Elgarte
julielgarte@yahoo.com.ar

Feminist theories can be schematically understood as embracing two sets of claims: (1) a set of normative claims (that people should be treated in such and such ways) and (2) a set of descriptive claims (that women are not being so treated, (a) in such and such respect, and (b) because of such and such causal mechanisms). In answering the question whether feminists should embrace basic income I will draw on the view that the gendered division of labour is a crucial determinant of a number of serious injustices affecting women, a stance that involves claims regarding the sort of injustices suffered by women in our societies (2a) and the mechanisms causing them (2b).

1) Protecting women against the consequences of the gendered division of labour. A feminist case for basic income

The so-called “traditional” gendered division of labour - prescribing a specialization in paid “productive” work for men and unpaid “reproductive” work for women- has been regarded by a number of feminist scholars as the primary cause of women’s social and economic inequality (Okin 1989, Bubeck 1995, Fraser 1996). Urged by much publicized ideals of femininity and masculinity, and enforced by many social and legal norms, the gendered division of labour gets to mold actual people’s lives. And this is so even today, when so many women have entered the labour market, for the prescription still holds that these women may choose to have a job, but familial responsibilities are still all theirs, a “second shift” for them to perform (Hochschild 1989). So be it as full time homemakers or double shifters, household and care work is still overwhelmingly women’s work, which in turn is not without consequence as to the modalities of women’s labour market participation, women being more likely to work part-time and to withdraw temporarily from the work force to accommodate family responsibilities, leading to a less stable and profitable working life.

The fact that women effectively bear exclusive (or main) responsibility for socially useful yet unpaid and undervalued household and caring work has several adverse consequences for women. The most immediate and apparent is deprivation of a (sufficient and reliable) independent income, which leads to domination while living with a (male) partner, and grave risk of poverty after a breakup or death of partner, especially when children are involved.

A basic income has been regarded as a policy that could advance gender justice precisely because of its ability to protect women from the distinct economic risks they face due to the gendered division of labour (Alstott 2001, Parker 1993). Full or partial specialization in unpaid care work puts women at serious financial risk in the (very

* This paper will appear in a debate section entitled “Should feminists endorse basic income?”, in *Basic Income Studies* Vol. 3 (1), December 2008, guest- edited by Ingrid Robeyns.

likely) event of divorce, for no or weak labour market attachment leads to lower earning potential while main responsibility for childcare after divorce amounts to greater financial needs and less time available for paid work. Furthermore, the consequences of women's more disrupted work-life extend far beyond child-rearing years into old age, for low and/or intermittent earnings lead to meager or no pension and social security entitlements. By decoupling benefit entitlement from paid work, a basic income is effectively able to provide life-long income security both to homemakers and part-time or intermittent workers, thus meeting women's distinctive needs regarding income security.

Additionally, as pointed out by Van Parijs (2001), a livable basic income would substantially improve most women's fallback option from any relationship (in giving them a modest but sufficient income they can count on no matter what). This enhanced fallback option due to economic independence would benefit women: I) by increasing their ability to exit (or not to enter) undesirable relationships of any sort, thus significantly protecting them from domination and its damaging effects (as described by Pettit 2007) and II) by consequently enhancing their voice within relationships (and hence the power to shape them so as to make them more satisfactory).

These are indeed strong *prima facie* reasons for feminists to support basic income: it could provide income security for homemakers and double shifters, while endowing all women with an income of their own, thus considerably protecting them from domination and enhancing to some degree their ability to shape the relationships they choose to enter into fairer ones.

However, further considerations need to be brought in, for, as I shall argue, the gendered division of labour has some important effects not taken into account in our previous assessment: effects on women's status and on the likelihood of gender violence.

2) Abolishing the gendered division of labour and how basic income could help

At least three causal mechanisms can be identified that link the gendered division of labour to women's lesser public status relative to men and, ultimately, increase the likelihood of violence against women. Firstly, the fact that women in the labour market (but not men) have to bear a second shift at home, makes many of them opt (even before marriage, but in anticipation to it) for less demanding dead-end jobs and/or interrupt or reduce their labour market participation during child-rearing years, leading to women being less likely to hold highly remunerated positions of prestige or authority, which in turn works to the detriment of women's public status, insofar as women get associated to unpaid and undervalued household and care work and to low prestige low retribution positions in the labour market. Secondly, the fact that women are collectively more prone to adjust their working life to accommodate family needs triggers statistical discrimination against all women, making it less likely even for career-oriented women to get hired for (or promoted to) the most prestigious positions. And as employers' hiring and promotion decisions are supposed to be based on the merits of (prospective) employees, women's lesser ability to climb up to the top is easily interpreted as a sign of their lesser capacities or inadequate attitudes, to the further detriment of women's status. Thirdly, as suggested by cross-cultural studies in accordance with a number of theories of child socialization, male uninvolvedness in child rearing could causally contribute to lowering women's status in a more direct way than through hampering women's ability to pursue socially valued activities, as the sons of distant fathers tend to define themselves in opposition to their mothers, and are thus

more prone to exhibit traits of hypermasculinity: to assert their masculinity by fearing and denigrating women (Coltrane, 1988).

Ultimately, women's lower status is bound to have graver effects than misrecognition, as cross-cultural studies show that the lower women's status in a society, the higher the likelihood of rape and violence against women (Sanday 1981). While this is not surprising given that lower status groups or individuals are usual targets of violent attacks, a propensity to perpetrate violence against women is to be expected in men exhibiting the traits of hypermasculinity mentioned above, as further corroborated by delinquency literature on rapists (Lisak 1991)

Effects on gender violence speak strongly against the gendered division of labour and for the importance of getting men more involved in the domestic sphere (Coltrane 1988, Lisak 1991). But role sharing is also arguably the only way to end the misrecognition of traditionally female work and afford women an equal status relative to men. And for a number of other reasons, including concern for children's wellbeing and the promotion of civic virtue, other feminist scholars have also regarded the abolishment of the gendered division of labour as a necessary step towards a just society (Okin 1989, Bubeck 1995, Gornick-Meyers 2003).

If, then, full justice for women entails the abolishment of the gendered division of labour, the question arises whether a basic income could not only counter the effects of the gendered division of labour on women's income security and bargaining power but also play a supportive role in the transition towards a society where the gendered division of labour could be abolished and full justice for women attained.

As we move from one form of social organization to another (from a society molded by the gendered division of labour to one in which such division is no longer socially enforced and has come to lose its current ascendancy on people's lives) what we need is an income security policy that can be supportive to those at the vanguard while also protecting those who lag behind and enabling them to move forward. In making role sharing economically viable for everyone while keeping everyone safe from poverty and economic dependency, a basic income scheme would indeed be up to this defy: it would protect homemakers without trapping them in the household and provide economic security to double shifters, while also enabling all couples to share paid and unpaid work in allowing them to both work for pay less than full-time or to temporarily interrupt labour market participation in order to free time for care work without thereby making household income to fall below a decent minimum.

3) Assessing a possible unwanted effect

It has been noted, though, that, given current gendered norms and expectations, men might not be willing in significant numbers to seize this opportunity to reduce or interrupt their labour market participation in order to take up a considerable amount of unpaid work at home, and that the introduction of a basic income might contribute to reinforcing the gendered division of labour if more women than men get to use this opportunity to reduce their labour market attachment (Robeyns 2000, 2001). Given the consequences of the gendered division of labour on women's status and on the incidence of gender violence, this cannot just be welcomed as the result of women's choice. But how should this affect our evaluation of a basic income scheme?

Being an income security policy, basic income should be primarily evaluated with regard to how well it succeeds in providing income security in a given context (and, as argued above, it can be expected to do quite a good job in providing income security as we move towards a gender just society). This is not to say its influence on

our ability to attain socially valuable ends other than income security can then be overlooked. However, the undesired effects seem, in this case, more properly imputable to deficient policy in other fields than to a deficiency ascribable to basic income. Effectively, what makes it possible for basic income to lead to a reinforcement of the gendered division of labour is the fact that it allows women to withdraw from the labour market without fear of destitution or economic dependency. But this is a necessary consequence of its fulfilling its duty to protect homemakers. It is hard to think how a policy that fulfilled this duty could by itself preclude the possibility of a reinforcement of the gendered division of labour. If, then, these adverse effects are to be attributed to deficient policies in other fields, rather than to basic income, it is by promoting changes in these other fields that they are to be overcome. And indeed, media regulations, educational and labour market policies, all could be used to promote role sharing under a basic income scheme, and all would arguably need to be reshaped anyway, if we are to advance towards a gender just society.

4) Policies to move forward

I shall then conclude by making some suggestions as to what sort of arrangements might arguably need to be introduced to promote role sharing and prevent the introduction of a basic income scheme to lead to a reinforcement of the gendered division of labour. Two types of measures seem necessary: measures enabling couples willing to share roles to act on their will, and measures promoting role sharing so as to increase the number of couples willing to share roles.

Enabling measures should aim at redefining the demands we as a society set on workers and carers, so that meeting them simultaneously becomes a true possibility. They should secure availability of jobs permitting both parents to free enough time to fulfill their caring responsibilities at home (possibly through a shorter work week for all workers plus a right for workers to further reduce their work hours to attend caring responsibilities, and a variety of leaves, as endorsed by Gornick and Meyers 2003). Affordable and easily available high quality care services and adapted school schedules would also be needed (for even if both parents are willing to work shorter hours, it will be difficult for most to arrange work schedules so as to be able to do without some external care).

Promoting measures, on the other hand, should aim at changing traditional gender norms and may include: direct educational efforts on children and adolescents at school (possibly in the form of classes on how to combine work and family responsibilities for both girls and boys, as advocated by Okin (1989), and preferably taught by male teachers); fighting gender stereotypes in textbooks, advertising and television shows directed at children (either through straightforward prohibition or through economic incentives to portray men and women in situations typical of role sharing); and creating incentives for couples to behave in accordance with egalitarian gender norms, which would be good in itself and would additionally help establish role sharing as normal and ultimately as normative (as proposed by Brighouse and Wright 2007).

These or other (more efficacious) arrangements need to be designed and put to practice if we are to move towards a society where the gendered division of labour is abolished and men and women are no longer pressed by social norms and institutions to deny or forfeit one half of their humanity, and where women no longer have to bear the consequences of having been assigned the less valued half. As we move towards such

society, a basic income can be trusted to support those at the front, while keeping those at the back safe and enabling them to move forward.

References

- Alstott, Anne (2001) "Good for women", in Philippe Van Parijs, *What's wrong with a free lunch?*, Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (eds.), Boston: Beacon Press.
- Brighouse, Harry and Eric Olin Wright (2007) "Strong gender egalitarianism", paper for Real Utopias Project 2006 volume *Institutions for gender egalitarianism: creating the conditions for egalitarian dual-earner dual-caregiver families*. Available at: http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~mscaglio/2006documents/Brighouse_Wright_2007_Strong_Gender_Egalitarianism.pdf
- Bubeck, Diemut (1995) *Care, gender and justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coltrane, Scott (1988) "Father-child relationships and the status of women: a cross-cultural study", *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 93, no. 5, pp. 1060-1095.
- Fraser, Nancy (1996) "Gender equity and the welfare state: a postindustrial thought experiment" in Seyla Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gornick, Janet and Marcia Meyers (2003) *Families that work: policies for reconciling parenthood and employment*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hochschild, Arlie (1989) *The second shift*, London: Penguin Books.
- Lisak, David (1991) "Sexual aggression, masculinity, and fathers", *Signs*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 238-262.
- Okin, Susan Moller (1989) *Justice, gender and the family*, New York: Basic Books.
- Parker, Hermione (ed.) (1993) *Citizen's income and women*, BIRG Discussion Paper N°2.
- Pettit, Philip (2007) "A republican right to basic income?", *Basic Income Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, article 10. Available at: <http://www.bepress.com/bis/vol2/iss2/art10>
- Robeyns, Ingrid (2000) "Hush money or emancipation fee? A gender analysis of basic income" in L. Groot/ R. van der Veen, *Basic income on the agenda. Policy objectives and political chances*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.
- Robeyns, Ingrid (2001) "Will a basic income do justice to women?", *Analyse und Kritik*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 88-105.
- Sanday, Peggy Reeves (1981) *Female power and male dominance. On the origins of sexual inequality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Van Parijs, Philippe (2001) "Real freedom, the market and the family. A reply to seven critics" *Analyse und Kritik*, 23, pp.106-131.

Julieta Magdalena Elgarte
Universidad Nacional de La Plata
Facultad de Humanidades, Departamento de Filosofía
48 e/ 6 y 7, 1900 La Plata, Argentina
Université Catholique de Louvain, Chaire Hoover
3 Place Montesquieu, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
E-mail: julielgarte@yahoo.com.ar