

Basic Income and Caring: Why aren't all caregivers interested in Basic Income?

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Abstract

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6. Basic income and caring: Why aren't all caregivers interested in basic income?
7. Abstract:

Although a properly structured system of basic income has the potential to ensure a certain standard of living to unpaid caregivers, there is little knowledge about or interest in such proposals among this target group generally. In fact, caregiver NGOs (non-governmental organisations) are probably much more positively disposed towards proposals for basic income than are their members. Such a situation has arisen for a number of reasons, from the personal and political to activist recognition that strategic partnerships between NGOs working in different arenas can come together effectively behind a broad policy initiative. In this talk, I propose to examine the conditions under which caregivers, and their representative NGOs, move to support the principle of basic income, using in part the experience of FEFAF as a member of the European Platform of Social NGOs.

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Caregivers should, given the possibility of direct support that systems of Basic Income represent, be positively disposed to their introduction. Yet there is most often at best a lukewarm reception to proposals for a Basic Income, if not outright rejection, by caregivers. In this paper I propose to suggest how this may be overcome, and highlight one case, the acceptance of Basic Income by members of the European Platform of Social NGOs, an EU federation NGO (non-governmental organisation).

- I. Background to caregiver NGO positions and policy

To evaluate the propositions contained in this paper, it is necessary to outline the current structure of NGOs in Europe and their positions with regard to policy development and objective setting.

The author is currently president of FEFAF, the European Federation of Unpaid Parent and Carer At Home NGOs (la Fédération Européenne des Femmes Actives au Foyer, www.fefaf.be), which currently includes twenty European national or regional caregiver NGOs in seventeen European countries. The author is also vice president of Cúram, an Irish NGO seeking recognition for the unpaid work of parents and carers. Cúram was founded in 1981 and helped to found FEFAF in 1983. These associations seek to promote unpaid caregiving as a valid choice which can produce very positive outcomes for those in need of care, their families and their caregivers if systems of recognition and support are put in place at relevant levels.

FEFAF is a member of the European Women's Lobby (www.womenlobby.org), and FEFAF and the EWL are in turn members of the European Platform of Social NGOs (www.socialplatform.org), which unites federation NGOs (in other words, ones which have member associations in a majority of EU states) working on social issues. This paper will return to a discussion of the latter federation in part IV below. Although FEFAF is part of the women's movement, we seek to promote family caregiving by both men and women. One of the objectives of the women's movement is to increase male participation in caregiving, and FEFAF proposals support this objective.

II. Unpaid caregiver attitudes to Basic Income

The key reason for unpaid caregivers to support a system of Basic Income is that they would receive direct financial support as citizens and would therefore be in an improved, and more independent, financial position relative to the current situation. It would furthermore allow caregivers more flexibility, and allow them to return to education or employment more easily, since they would dispose of income which would enable them to fund replacement care for their children or dependent elderly or disabled relatives. It would also support voluntary activities within communities, since families would be under less financial pressure to meet the basic needs of their members and have more time to devote to community support. It would also represent an anti-poverty measure which carries no stigma, as is the case in Ireland for Child Benefit. No one refuses Child Benefit: even the rich accept it, so there is no stigma attached; and at the same time it is generally recognised as the single most effective anti-child-poverty measure in Ireland.

Proposals for Basic Income are generally seen as arising from politically left-wing approaches to economics, which may be seen positively or negatively by caregivers, depending on their overarching political viewpoints or background. There are, however, other reasons that caregivers might not view Basic Income more positively. Due to the effect Basic Income could have on marginal tax rates, those caregivers who would like to take up paid work might find that net income would not warrant the effort of taking up that work. Additionally, it might be harder for some caregivers, such as those with no other adults resident in the same household, to make ends meet than under the current social welfare arrangements.

Caregivers, however, recognise that they represent the greatest rationale for introducing basic income schemes. Do supporters of Basic Income simply make use of the socio-economic contribution of caregivers in their arguments or do they actually include and promote caregivers at all levels of the campaign?

III. Current socio-economic position of caregivers

a. Caregivers' rights

In 1995, the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women produced an agreement entitled the Platform for Action and Beijing Declaration. This document outlines extensive explicit recognitions and supports for all women's work, paid or unpaid, including agricultural and food production, child care and education, the care and support of elderly and disabled family and community members, and voluntary community work. There is also a detailed action plan on the areas where governments and international bodies should act, including the collection of statistics on unpaid work and support for unpaid caregivers at a variety of levels¹. This agreement was passed unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and reaffirmed unanimously by the same body in 2005.

Unpaid caregivers also have the right to recognition and support for their work recognised in other human rights agreements, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights² and the Convention on the Rights of the Child³ and in national constitutions (for example Article 41.2° of Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Irish Constitution⁴).

Despite the fact that in terms of rights caregivers are fairly well served, little progress has been made by the UN, its relevant bodies and agencies such as the Statistics Commission of the Economic and Social Council (indeed ECOSOC itself) and the International Labour Organisation or member states, parties to the above agreements, in implementing the measures outlined in support of unpaid caregivers.

b. Outcomes for choosing to provide care

In practice, the status of caregivers is particularly low. Few people now identify themselves as homemakers and even fewer as housewives. The low status of caregivers extends to the paid sector as well. These 'mommy-replacement' jobs (Theresa Funicello's term) in the services and care sectors tend to be paid as close as is possible to minimum wage, coupled with few opportunities for advancement and are marked by high turnover. Worse still is the ill-treatment of migrant workers in the domestic sector, and abuses are rife in all developed economies: contracts are not honoured, passports are withheld, and the ceiling for working hours is not respected.

In the case of caregivers looking after children, for example, the ultimate outcomes of caregiving (i.e. the supports necessary to ensure the positive cognitive, social and behavioural development of children) are not mainstreamed into policy on children's education and care. How can good quality options then compete with poorer quality providers? Quality is extremely important in care, especially in early years' child care: although moderate amounts (i.e. less than 30 hours per week) of good quality non-maternal childcare can, if properly resourced, give good outcomes for children,

¹ full text available from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

² text available on http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_cescr.htm

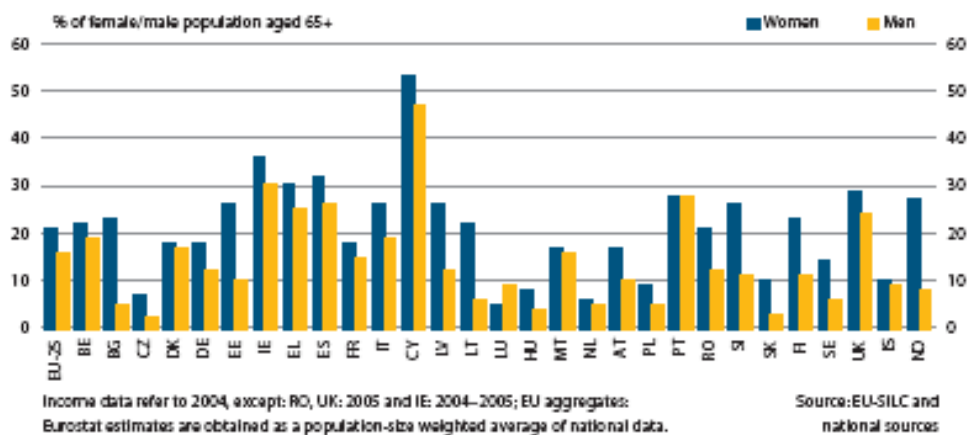
³ available on <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>

⁴ available from <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/static/256.htm>

majority maternal care gives even better ultimate outcomes.⁵ Unless we are willing to devote resources to care in such a way that quality provision is supported, we can expect poorer outcomes for both caregivers and those for whom they care, which ultimately impacts on society as a whole.

Those who provide care on an unpaid basis are at a higher risk of poverty than the general population, especially as they age and in the case of divorce. Overall, the impact on women is significant. More women than men are at risk of poverty in every country of the European Union (EU-25) with the exception of Luxembourg, where there are more men in poverty than women, and Portugal, where the rates are the same (see Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1. Proportion of women and men aged 65 and over at risk of poverty, 2005⁶



c. Defining and supporting work

There is another prevailing attitude in public policy, and that is that work and paid work are coterminous. This attitude does not reflect any economic definition of work; indeed the United Nations generally estimate that the total value of unpaid work in a country is equal to 30%-50% of that country's Gross Domestic Product, which would make it either the largest or the second largest sector. In Ireland, the average annual value (base 2004) of the average homemaker has been assessed as €23,540.40⁷. This is borne out also by the time-use survey carried out in Ireland and published in 2005. It shows that those who are described as on 'home duties' i.e. homemakers, provide

⁵ This position is supported by the largest long-term international studies on child development. According to the United States' National Institute of Child Health and Human Development long-term cohort study (for more information, see <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/seccyd/overview.cfm>), the best outcomes for children's development are associated with primarily maternal care. The Families, Children and Child Care FELL study (in Oxford University <http://www.edstud.ox.ac.uk/research/resgroup/fell/pfellrp.php>) similarly highlighted the positive outcomes for children in primarily maternal care.

⁶ *The Life of Women and Men in Europe: a statistical portrait*. Theme: Population and social conditions. Collection: Statistical books. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2008. [online] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1073,46587259&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&p_product_code=KS-80-07-135

⁷ Kiely, G. 2004. "The Value of Unpaid Work in the Home." Paper read at conference *International Year of the Family + 10: Working for the Family*, Dublin Castle, Ireland.

just over 63.5 hours of work (broken down into care, employment and household work) and those who are ‘employed’ work for just over 58.5 hours per week⁸.

The International Labour Organisation’s definition of ‘economically active’ is also misleading. Most people assume that there should be some correlation between being assessed as ‘economically active’, producing goods and services, and receiving income sufficient to fund a basic standard of living and make social and pension contributions. What would be a fair and meaningful definition of ‘economically active’? In fact, the ILO definition of economically active is one hour per week or more in paid employment. In other words, it neither provides a minimum assessment of the productive aspect of work nor ensures the economic security or independence of the worker.

Even economists and researchers working in this area conflate work with paid work. For example, economically-inactive persons are “characterised by not having a job and either not actively looking for a job or not immediately available for a job” by Eurostat⁹ (the European Union statistical body). Economic activity is *not* limited to ILO headings, but defined as the production of (theoretically) tradable goods and services. Whether these goods and services are produced by a paid worker or on an unpaid basis is irrelevant. Some countries, for example, include breastfeeding in their GDP. Parents would otherwise have to purchase formula for their babies, and breastfeeding is preferable from a public health and bonding perspective. FEFAF’s question is: why stop with breastfeeding? why not include the provision of all relevant goods and services produced on an unpaid basis in a country’s GDP?

Unfortunately for unpaid caregivers, the ILO definition of work forms the basis of several policy planks at EU and member state level. For example, the Lisbon Agenda, agreed by the European Council (the heads of government of the member states of the EU), sets a goal of 60% of women active within the workforce and that 90% of children aged between three and school age and 33% of children 0-3 should be in non-maternal childcare by 2010. This agenda was set without regard to either the preferences of the women themselves or reference to any research which establishes that such childcare arrangements would result in positive outcomes for children. The role of governments, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is to establish supports for parents in that role, not to decide on their behalf.¹⁰

Another example in the Irish context is the Carer’s Allowance, available as a social welfare income support for carers. If a carer agrees to take responsibility for the care of a family member on a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, 52-week-per-year basis,

⁸ Information compiled from Tables B.1 and B.2, p. 37-38. F. McGinnity et al., 2005. *Time-Use in Ireland 2005: Survey Report*

Dublin, Ireland: ESRI. [online] Available from www.esri.ie

⁹ Hardarson, O., 2007. *People outside the labour force: the downward trend continues*. (Eurostat) Statistics in focus: POPULATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS 122/2007, p. 3. [online] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1073,46587259&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&p_product_code=KS-SF-07-122 .

¹⁰ Article 18.2° For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. Convention on the Rights of the Child [online] (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>)

and if the total household income is below a total of €665 per week, the carer can qualify for a payment of €214 per week¹¹. As it is, only a small minority of carers are able to access any support from the State. And they are included in Ireland's inactive population under ILO rules since they are unavailable for (paid) work!

IV. Case study: Caregiver support for Basic Income in European Platform of Social NGOs

Clearly, caregivers in general should be better off were a system of Basic Income in place, especially if the system were sensitive to the requirements of family members in need of care and those who provide that care.

The question then is, if proponents of Basic Income want to attract the support of caregivers, how can this be done?

There is already an example of caregivers supporting Basic Income. As stated at the beginning of this paper, there is an umbrella organisation active at EU level entitled the European Platform of Social NGOs (www.socialplatform.org). The Social Platform unites a large group of European federations working in the social arena (as opposed to environmental groups, employers' groups and labour unions). The Social Platform develops common positions on topics of interest to member organisations, using these positions as the basis for action and communication with the various bodies of the EU. All of these organisations support recognition for unpaid work at EU level; they also support the introduction of Basic Income.

Whenever there is a meeting or a campaign, the members of the Social Platform come together to agree a common response or plan of action. The Social Platform is largely based on trust: although many of the organisations may disagree on objectives and strategies, they recognise that if they collaborate, reach an agreement on action, and then follow through on their commitments, progress can be achieved.

¹¹ Full information on rates and rules for Carer's Allowance can be accessed on http://www.citizensinformation.ie/categories/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/carers/carers_allowance/?searchterm=carer%20allowance.