

Feminists and the Left on Guaranteed Livable Income

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The Women’s Movement has always shared in the interests and struggles of those in the Left, but sadly, we know that the instrumental work done by women to advance the Left agenda is often written out of history.

Women fought on issues within the work force such as: the burden of care-work, the gender wage-gap, and sexual discrimination & violence within the work place – issues often ignored by left men. Despite the lack of attention given to women’s achievements in the progressive left – they have made some monumental gains for all women today.

The win for maternity leave offers an example of the achievements that can be made when the women’s movement and the left work in alliance. In my next example I refer to the labour movement, although I realize that the left is more diverse and the labour movement only represents a small portion of the left.

In the 1970s, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers demanded 20 fully paid weeks of maternity leave, and when they were refused – they went on a 42-day strike. The union leader made a call out to 500 women’s organizations asking for support and the Canadian Women’s Movement responded.

Women’s organizations held demonstrations, marches, press releases, and published writing to support the fight for maternity leave. Because of the strikers, and the women’s groups actions – their employer agreed to 17 weeks of maternity leave with nearly full pay with use of unemployment insurance similar to what we have today. I think we now have another opportunity for a strong alliance in a fight for Guaranteed Livable Income.

Currently, there is debate and discussion within the women’s movement and within the left on the topic of Guaranteed Income. Though there are disagreements and struggles between us, we are committed to a respectful and rigorous debate towards our shared goal of economic freedom as we know this is how revolutions become successful.

After hearing John Clarke - the leading organizer for OCAP Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, speak on his skepticism that a progressive Basic Income is impossible within the constraints of an oppressive and unequal capitalist system – I am compelled to respond to his critique..

We as feminists share the same skepticism to known capitalist mascots such as Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg for touting their version of Basic Income and we align with the left in opposition to poverty and capitalism– however, we still believe that we can fight for a progressive Basic Income, one that we call a Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI).

GLI is ultimately a reform, not a total transformation of the social structures of sexism, racism or capitalism but it can be a truly effective reform. Feminists have considered some critiques or potential downfalls that are worth exploring.

One common debate on how GLI will affect women, is whether a GLI might force women back into the private sphere of doing care work and whether this will undo progress on women's labour rights, social participation, and fight for affordable childcare.

Kathleen Lahey, a professor from Queens University, wrote a position paper and she argued that a Basic Income will put pressure on women to stay home to do care-work and domestic labor, which undermines the progress for women in the workforce and in the labor movement. She argues that employers would use BI to further discriminate against family caregivers, dissolving some of the gains we have won for mothers in the workforce.

Another similar argument is from Sylvia Federici, a feminist anti-capitalist theorist, who wrote a critique of the Wages for Housework campaign warns that women being compensated for housework would further entrench women in the "housewives" role in society by the capitalist exploitation of our "labour of love" which cannot be measured fully.

Because of immigration policies that coerce women of color to do very low paid care-work in North America – for example, the temporary foreign workers from the Philippines often employed as nannies or care workers - there is a danger of all care-work being completely monetized and commodified in the same fashion.

Although I found these arguments compelling, –women, even though they have become increasingly involved in the workforce, are still doing the majority of this care-work. And in order alleviate the burden, women should have a GLI to give them broader economic options.

I was delighted to meet Liane Gale and Ann Withorn when they struck the Basic Income Women's Action group. Liane presented at the NABIG conference in 2016 about the "Care Centered Economy". She takes the position that our current economic system, capitalism, is by its nature a patriarchal force that undervalues care work based on patriarchal misconceptions that care work is women's work. She argues that capitalism rewards productive labor which often causes harm to society and devalues reproductive labor that is beneficial to society.

She takes a similar approach to Cindy L'Hirondelle, an organizer with Victoria Status of Women Action Group, in her article "Why Women would Gain from a Guaranteed Livable Income" which conveys how we over-consume products that leave waste, and how a GLI would be helpful in a transition period to change our economic system from a "death-cycle economy to a life-cycle economy" by which she means we would stop counting "things that are damaging to life" as an economic benefit.

Though a GLI is crucial, there needs to be a total transformation of societal attitudes towards caring for others, which includes pressing men to take on their equal share of responsibilities and that is inherent in the success of a feminist revolution.

Leading up to and during the course of the National Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's Inquiry, we have heard many indigenous leaders, organizations, and Indigenous people, describe their key struggle with poverty. Fay Blaney, a long time Indigenous feminist activist and founding member of Aboriginal Women's Action Network who was an expert witness in the National Inquiry discusses the key issues Indigenous women face intertwining the link between colonialism, sexist violence, and abject poverty – calling on the national government to make amends.

Our collective discussed how a state funded GLI might undermine indigenous communities' ability to gain real sovereignty over their rightful share of resources and wealth and self-determination.

The controversy is that this is not nearly enough to satisfy what the rightful share of resources are, for the Indigenous people of Canada. We believe that this needs serious consideration, while in the meantime, ensuring that Indigenous women have the economic stability that a GLI could offer which could interfere with their vulnerability to male violence and impoverishment, and could benefit their communities.

Another controversy among the left on the topic of basic income, is a worry that those in power will misuse a basic income to maintain their power and the status quo. Specifically, that employers would use basic income as a subsidy to underpay their employees and lower employer's budgets. Also, that the government would use basic income to cut off social programs.

These worries are legitimate if we win only the minimal restrictive Basic Income that is often championed by billionaires, and forces on the right and if we don't continue to fight on all fronts to end racism, sexism and economic inequality.

There are other economic campaigns supported by the left that include the raised minimum wages and welfare increases that our collective has been actively supporting – yet, we know that they are not adequate in addressing women's poverty. Our callers often cannot work due to their responsibilities to family, due to discrimination in the workplace, or due to their experiences with violent and controlling men, nor do we think that meaningless jobs would gain them much freedom. We also know that the welfare state heavily polices women and punishes them. Women's liberation relies on pushing back against this domination of the state and of the employer.

Our approach is to fight to ensure that our feminist principles align with the way a GLI is constructed. We approached each controversy by trying to answer, what is the feminist principle in this debate?

Out of these discussions amongst us, we agreed to a set list of feminist principles we demand in a Guaranteed Livable Income.

These are our principles:

Guaranteed Livable Income must ensure all women are included and protected from economic insecurity. This is how we define universality.

A Guaranteed Livable Income must be given to all individual adults in a household regardless of marital status and must be enough to provide for each child that an adult has guardianship over. This will interfere with one of the ways that women are financially dependent on men.

A Guaranteed Livable Income must be set high enough to meet adequate standards of living. It should provide all basic necessities such as a nutritious diet, safe and adequate housing, transportation, and allow for some discretionary spending to ensure full participation in community life.

A Guaranteed Livable Income must be given unconditionally. This income should be given without a means test, without a job search requirement, without limitations on expenditures, without claw backs, without wait times or any other conditions. The only condition is that you are a human being living in Canada.

A Guaranteed Livable Income must be easily accessible regardless of people's locations so that women in rural and isolated communities can easily access a GLI.

A Guaranteed Livable Income must be available to refugees, immigrant women married to sponsors, temporary foreign workers, those with no status and those applying for immigration status while in Canada

As feminists, we believe our government protects resources for the upper classes. We reject the lie of false scarcity.

In a rich country such as Canada, all of its inhabitants deserve the right to live with dignity. The Pictou Statement published 2004 by Lakeman, Angela Miles (speaking currently at the other panel), and Christensen-Ruffman asserts that society undervalues women's work that is "central to individual and collective survival" and that women are "denied our rightful political power over the economics governing our communities".

As feminists we are demanding our fair share of the common wealth. The successes of the feminist revolution is rooted in collectively insisting on 100% of what we want, making the impossible, possible – for our desire for freedom makes Guaranteed Livable Income only a minute step towards our vision of liberation.