What could the Basic Income Guarantee do for Women's Rights?

by Josephine Grey

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Women's rights are human rights and duties that are specific to addressing inequities and issues experienced by women (or those engaged/identified with traditional roles of women.) In most cases economic, social and cultural rights issues arise from the realities of motherhood or primary care-giving for children, vulnerable adults and elders, as well as the dynamics of gender relations and sexual exploitation that affect all women and girls. While much progress has been made, or at least appears to have been made, there remain many structural systemic and cultural issues that continue to plague women's lives, in Canada and beyond.

One promising approach to the broader issues of poverty and inequity is the idea of a Basic Income Guarantee ("BIG"). What would this kind of program, which now has government backing in Ontario for pilot projects, mean for women, and how could it be shaped to ensure that it addresses the particular problems women face? For the purpose of this article a Basic Income Guarantee means an income sufficient to provide a basket of goods and services required to provide an adequate standard of living, indexed to the cost of living to every individual 18 and over, and with child benefits to be sustained up to age 17, regardless of work status.

Why not just increase rates and wages in the current system?

______As I can attest from personal experience as a widow who raised 5 children, welfare and subsidized housing systems can be punitive, inadequate, humiliating and create long-term anxiety. For anyone forced to rely on today's dysfunctional income programs, it can feel like one is being surveilled and at risk from having to rely on faceless bureaucrats who can make or break one's existence with a stroke of a pen or a simple computer error.

Finding jobs, along with the resources needed to "make a living" such as childcare in this age of austerity and precarious work, is a perilous and exhausting experience for most people but especially for sole support mothers. The resulting chronic insecurity is exacerbated by the many complexities of income programs like Employment Insurance that often fail to provide adequate, if any safety at all, when underemployment fails to sustain basic needs. Single women, especially those from vulnerable communities, are increasingly without secure housing and at the mercy of predatory employment or criminal exploitation. The expanding population of aging women, ex-wives and former mothers (many who have had their children removed), with chronic health and trauma issues and pharmaceutical or substance dependencies is a largely hidden growing and costly public health tragedy.

The negative impact of decades of deficit driven austerity and the corporatization of government systems, under the influence of predominant international banking and financial systems, has been spread wide and deep for an ever-growing proportion of the population and is devastating vulnerable communities. Simply put, public services that have been manipulated to fit the "business model" (to appease the corporate elite), especially systems geared to income redistribution, are no longer able to function within a rational framework and are now dangerously dysfunctional.

The basis of social inequality leading to unsustainable economic and environmental conditions is rooted first and foremost in gender discrimination. Marilyn Waring, in *If Women Counted*, outlines how the continuing oppression of women reflected throughout society is embedded in the Standard Accounting System of the United Nations (used by Nation States), which proclaims that; "the work of women in the family and community is of little or no value". This bizarre notion has helped to create a global economic system that generates debilitating and punitive conditions for the majority of women worldwide by debasing and ignoring the value of the very labour which sustains the species and upon which all other economic activity depends. In many cases, this labour is no longer even called 'work' or 'labour'; these terms commonly only refer to paid work. In economic studies, activity outside of paid work is usually labelled 'leisure' although domestic labour and caregiving are universal necessities that require more time and energy from most women over their lifetimes.

Moreover, nations are obliged to value their economic activity according to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) formula which only counts how much money is accumulated or exchanged, not whether it is beneficial or detrimental, and excludes the value of the ecologies and other vital non-commodified goods and services that all societies rely on. The resulting financial/monetary framework imposed initially in the "Bretton Woods" agreement on the economic functioning of nations, purports to stand outside of the jurisdiction of the UN system and has therefore been able to distort and derail the very purpose of member states to use their economic systems to uphold and protect the human rights of their peoples.

In Canada, the constitution still proclaims that our currency and public revenue is to be issued, managed and allocated by the Public Banking system; the Bank of Canada, incorporating citizen bonds and low- or zero-interest borrowing rates, as well as full oversight and control of all government spending by Parliament. This has been far from the case since 1972, when the Bank of International Settlements rallied to include Canada in its regime of private sector control of the monetary system. Since then, Parliament has no say over the amount of debt we are all obliged to pay nor over many large corporate subsidies, especially for the Oil industry, our elected officials are left to tinker with what remains after the banks and corporations have extracted their cut of our tax dollars. To make this more palatable to a bewildered public (including most politicians who need no special education to be qualified for office) many efforts have been made to discredit the role of the state in stewarding the health and well being of society and the very concept of the common good. Given the complexity and mystery surrounding the mechanics of this profit-driven fiat monetary system, it is difficult indeed for supposedly democratic nations to engineer any major reforms needed to fairly redistribute public wealth, and to balance the tension between economies and environments, for the sake of the commons and future generations.

And yet, Canada and these same governments have also for the most part ratified the following human rights commitments:

> "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular: the right to work; the right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction.... States Parties shall ... provide special protection to women during pregnancy in ... work proved to be harmful to them.... States Parties shall ... ensure ... that [women in rural areas] participate in and benefit from rural development and ... ensure ... the right: ... to participate in ... development planning at all levels; to have access to adequate health care facilities...; to obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal...; ... to have access to... appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform...; to enjoy adequate living conditions...." (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Articles 11 and 14)

In addition to these treaty articles, the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1972) similarly covers the rights of women and all people to self-determination, an adequate standard of living, best available healthcare, income security, protection to support the needs of families, freedom to choose decent work, and more. While these laws and treaties designed to support just and human societies continue to languish in obscurity and thus have been difficult to enforce, it seems obvious that the reason they are so unknown and rarely claimed is to prevent people from utilizing their governments to exercise the power of the state to resist oligarchy (or banktocracy).

How a basic income guarantee can support human rights implementation

One stated objective of an adequate basic income program is to finally recognize the value of reproductive and home-based care-giving work, while allowing women to choose whether and how much to work for wages as well. Of course, other services such as daycare, elder care and mental health/recovery programs remain necessary, as the Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) is designed simply to secure basic needs such as food and shelter. Thus the BIG would support both self-determination, and the right to healthy conditions in which to raise a family if a woman chooses to do so with a spouse or on her own. It would also empower more childless women to support themselves and be less reliant on unhealthy domestic relationships.

In the 21st century, as corporate globalization continues to dominate civilization, issues faced by women in Canada include the continuing lack of pay equity, equal opportunity, income/job security and increasing time pressures. In spite of popular memes proclaiming the progress of feminism, in real terms women's alleged "equality" remains elusive. The plight of many exhausted women struggling to provide sufficient income as well as primary care for their families while faced with ever-increasing costs and a very precarious labour market is evidence enough of this. A basic income would allow all women to pace their lives and make healthier choices as their families and/or careers evolve.

It would also vastly increase women's bargaining power as workers. No longer would so many women be forced to accept variable shifts, uncertain schedules and minimal paycheques in precarious jobs without benefits – an exhausting and risky lifestyle which often destroys women's health, fragments families and guarantees dependence on utterly inadequate and invasive social assistance schemes.

Women attempting to navigate today's economy often bear heavy student debts and/or inevitable credit card debt as they borrow to buy food and pay the bills when wages or welfare payments fall short. The growing stress, lack of time and stability, and anxiety about the state of our world is severely undermining our health and quality of life. How many women today can say that the heavy student debt they acquired, in order to choose a decent livelihood and live in acceptable conditions, actually paid off? How often did it make their lives sustainable and secure, especially if they are also mothers? In fact, student debt has most often increased the burden and stress of the costs of care for their children and other dependants.

Even as women have struggled for the right to choose paid work and be economically independent, the cost of living rose and wages stagnated, so that more than one average income is required to provide an adequate standard of living. Women are now expected to do it all – motherhood and domestic work, while forging multiple, flexible career paths, even as the public services that formerly assisted families continue to evaporate or are privatized out of the price range of the average waged worker.

Very few women can make all this time- and money-juggling work unless they have extended family support with childcare and/or enough family wealth to enable a healthy balance between work and life responsibilities. A resurgence of misogynistic pop culture and misbehaviour by many powerful figures that is also permeating younger generations of men along with the rise of extreme and ubiquitous porn culture further engenders fear and insecurity among women and their daughters.

How BIG could help address violence against women

______The chronic insecurity and inadequacy of wages facing most families create a dangerous trap for women facing domestic abuse, especially when combined with complex and punitive social security systems which require women to obey patriarchal rules governing intimate relationships and other criteria to maintain eligibility. In spite of all the public awareness efforts to address violence against women, it is perhaps even harder now than it was 30 years ago to escape an abusive home relationship with one's children, due to the risks and realities of overpriced housing and chronic income insecurity.

Economic and time stress is a major trigger for domestic violence among couples, and so our precarious debt-burdened and unsustainable economy not only exacerbates the problem but also makes escape more perilous. This is especially the case in rural areas where there are few if any supports available. Thus we have seen no progress in reducing domestic violence. Furthermore, the state is more likely than ever to simply take the children into "care" instead of providing supports to heal and stabilize families.

A basic income program would not rely on child support income calculations or the various criteria currently imposed relating to women and children's systemic profile or location/type of housing, etc. There would be much less oppressive hassle associated with spousal or child support, which is also rendered precarious in today's labour market. Social assistance programs tend to require women to go to court to impose child support arrangements and then deduct the "income", a process that too often causes years of stress, conflict and hardship.

Far too many women end up childless and homeless, as child “protection” systems relying on caseload numbers for continued funding too often remove children from households due to “failing to provide” a common condition created by a broken economy and dysfunctional government programs. Shelters in Toronto and elsewhere are full of thousands of women who have fallen victim to both systemic and domestic abuse, and too often, had their children “taken into care”. Combined with an adequate child benefit, a basic guaranteed income would at long last make freedom from domestic abuse and exploitation truly possible for victimized women and their children.

What BIG could do for freedom and the pursuit of climate resilience

______A decent basic income would at last provide a basis of security that would allow women to plan ahead, change jobs, improve their health and avoid using credit to cover basic needs. It would thus uphold the most fundamental human right of self-determination without forcing families to sacrifice the right to an adequate standard of living or fall into a debt trap. To be able to manage one’s time in a manner that allows for family time, learning, community development and attending to health needs is fundamental to the realization of one’s human rights. Even those who are able to earn high incomes for extended periods of time are often deprived of rights; to enjoy their family, to engage in community and healthy activities, and thus to sustain full and meaningful lives free from fear.

Women and children are also more vulnerable to the chaotic effects and impacts of climate change due to the many factors mentioned above. The degree of systemic, individual and community innovation and change that must occur if our children's future is to be worth living is profound. The current profit-driven corporate-dominated system has effectively colonized people’s time under the pressures of rising debt and chronic insecure and inadequate employment. How can enough people take enough time to reflect on their ways of life and livelihoods to risk trying to innovate and cultivate more sustainable and resilient ways of life?

Women who receive less income and/or are raising children alone are especially hampered from making healthier and more ecological choices and thus contributing to the required shift in humanity’s relationship to the biosphere we depend on. Whether forced to shop at Walmart and contribute to exploitation and needless landfill of cheap products, and feed their families junk food in the north, or forced to burn scarce wood for cooking in the south, there is no room for better choices in a global economy based on austerity and extreme inequality. Given the endless and exhausting time and money pressures most women endure in today’s economy, how can we find the time and energy to engage in political and community action? How can we envision and cultivate the solutions we must find to mitigate and adapt to climate change and heal our toxic environments?

An adequate basic income could not only allow us to access education and shift to greener careers, but also enable communities to create the necessary broader change. Circles of people and families could pool their resources to start up ecological sustainable enterprises like land trust farms, food and energy co-ops, or concentrate on perfecting and sharing their artistic skills to contribute to a vibrant and healthy evolving society.

In fact it could be argued that the realization of universal human rights – including the right to a liveable environment – for women and indeed for all people, cannot be achieved within today's dysfunctional unbalanced economic systems without the foundation of security provided by an accountable, reliable guaranteed income. In addition massive resources are required to help heal the devastation caused by decades of austerity and dysfunctional undemocratic governance.

The basic income concept has been around for centuries. In the 20th century the idea has attracted right wing conservative attention as well as being advocated by human philosophers such as Martin Luther King. To those who aim for the end of the welfare state the basic income is seen as a way to reduce the role of government by replacing social programs and adequacy is not a concern. For progressives, a Basic Income Guarantee sufficient to meet basic needs provides a solid socio-economic foundation for either the reform or transformation of corporate capitalism to protect the majority of society from the invisible fist of the market.

Both sides now also refer to the imminent and massive loss of jobs in many sectors due to an exponential increase in automation of labour in many of the sectors that continue to provide employment. There are certainly risks associated with the process of introducing a basic income and many thinkers caution that the "costs" would be very high, perhaps failing to account for the added value of investing in economic and social stability and health and the cost savings that would follow. Estimates for Canada for cost savings in healthcare range as high as $80 billion, there would certainly be other savings; from reduced crime, less need for shelters and other crisis related spending. However, an ill-conceived program, lacking strong humanist principles in a context that neglects to address related needs such as rent control, decent health benefits including dental and prescription coverage and support for care-giving could sustain and even exacerbate the systematic costs of extreme inequality.

Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on poverty, has released a report about the urgent importance of the BIG to the world. In his words,

"The starting point is to acknowledge that economic insecurity represents a fundamental threat to human rights. It is not only a threat to the enjoyment of economic and social rights, even though they are a principal concern. Extreme inequality, rapidly increasing insecurity, and the domination of politics by economic elites in many countries, all threaten to undermine support for, and ultimately the viability of, the democratic systems of governance upon which the human rights framework depends." http://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/UN.report.pdf

Getting BIG right for women's human rights

So how do we ensure that the basic income concept, now widely discussed around the world and being piloted in several countries as well as in Ontario, will indeed be adequate, reliable, responsive, timely and respect women's and everyone's human rights? By engaging in debate and advocating that the BIG program be developed within the framework of international human rights and responsibilities already ratified by our governments. If we actively claim these formally acknowledged rights and duties, we can litigate if necessary to ensure that the program does what it needs to do – that is, to fairly provide adequate incomes in a framework that also ensures that other needs such as safe and secure housing, healthcare, childcare, elder care, employment standards, are provided for and/or regulated to prevent exploitative and predatory abuses.

The recent General Assembly acclamation of the 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), also included in the Paris Climate Accord, is an important opportunity to advocate for BIG in Canada and globally, given the first goal is to end poverty. BIG also relates to several other of the goals, such as addressing climate change, gender equality and improving democratic governance, and many of the 162 targets that define the goals in more detail. It is interesting indeed that most of North American society and our governments seem unaware of the SDG's, though many other parts of the world are very engaged.

If we are able, as well, to invest more time in developing and monitoring enforceable environmental regulations, and free up time and resources to remediate the devastating damage already done to our local ecologies, we could truly begin to realize the most important right of all – the right of children to achieve their full potential and enjoy health and well being in a thriving and liveable world. To achieve the freedom and capacity to evolve towards an equitable, sustainable world for women, and thus all of humanity, we must be vigilant to ensure that any and all basic income guarantee initiatives are firmly built on the foundation of human rights treaties and principles.

Thirty years of local to global human rights work has shown me that belief in the possibility of a better future is vital to the task of empowering people to take action. As awareness and hope gain momentum, so would capacity to hold local and national governments accountable to human rights obligations. When a critical mass of governments have been pressured into respecting human rights as their primary duty, it then becomes possible to hold the international investment, finance and trade system accountable for the realization of human rights within the context of addressing climate change and sustainable development for all. The subsequent freedom to use central banks to fund generous basic income and other basic human rights programs such as affordable housing would entrench these rights. Obviously, this could take a lot of time, but building on what has been done so far, the following strategies can do a great deal to move humanity forward towards.

- Engage communities and organizations in participatory research and evaluation; to document and report the impact of economic policies and rulings on human rights and environmental conditions, to inform the public, governments, courts and human rights commissions.

- Collaborate on developing indicators to measure compliance and progress towards sustainable development goals, including ending poverty and fostering gender equality, such as time valuation, health and quality of life data.

- Increase the participation of women and others most affected, often those exposed to the worst environmental conditions, in the process of claiming human rights and remedies such as the basic income, and defend them from retribution.

- Involve communities and local governments in human rights and ecological education and in building capacity to fulfil rights to an unconditional and sufficient basic income, housing, health, education and public services such as clean drinking water.

- Educate Parliamentarians and elected representatives on their duty to uphold human rights and invoke national sovereignty in matters concerning domestic human rights and the health and preservation of the environment for future generations.

- Propose constitutional or legislative reform to protect the primacy of basic human rights including access to and the adequacy of the basic income, in domestic law.

- Establish and maintain standards and mechanisms for holding governments and institutions accountable to basic human rights, and to guarantee sufficient and accessible basic incomes

In conclusion, I believe that if the above human rights based strategies were implemented on a local, national and global scale, women and men everywhere would be able to engage in a powerful global process to co-create resilient societies and achieve peace and sustainable prosperity for future generations, beginning with a Guaranteed Basic Income for all.