

# Women work at the heart of community solidarity: the intersection of debates about informal networking and universal basic income.

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## Abstract

Feminists have called for the recognition of unpaid work within economic accounting and practices. Most of these discussions focus on the role women play in domestic and caring work, and yet care is only one kind of unpaid work. Scant attention is given to the role that women play in forming, and maintaining informal networks and building local social capital, essential ingredients of more localised solidarity and sharing economies. In addition, advocates of universal basic income as a transformative social process argue that with UBI, more time will be available for people to spend time with friends and building 'community'. This paper will explore the intersections of the two fields of feminist thought – on UBI and informal community networking – to examine their implications for de-growth, or at least for a steady state future.

## Postgrowth Scenarios

We cannot continue as we are, plundering the planet beyond its capacity to renew, subjugating millions to lives of precarity, poverty and despair and with economies worldwide wavering on the brink of crises and collapse. What will and should life be like in a post growth situation?

Amalgamating various different rationales for de-growth (see for example D'Alisa, Demario and Kallis, 2015), we can anticipate a number of things, all linked to a re-aligned economy, not just challenging prevailing emphasis on economic growth, but embracing feminist and ecological economic thought. We can envisage a future that is ecologically safe with people living within planetary boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015) with greater social equity and work for the social good rather than merely for profit.

We can imagine that there will be less formal, paid work and consequently more time to spend on family and friends, leisure and on building community through participation and solidarity activities. There will be a shift in social values in favour of care – care for children, those with poor health and elders - and caring work will be shared out equitably between men and women. There will more time spent on socially useful activities, including food growing, low level manufacture and care of

tools and household appliances, community events and activities; there will be reduced energy use and more sharing of energy intensive appliances; there will be less car use and more use of public transport, cycling and walking; there will be more work locally, meeting community needs. All of these things might seem utopian, but necessary. The challenges of how to move from where we are now to where we need to get to are complex.

These post-growth imaginaries bear a remarkable similarity with some of the anticipated outcomes of a Universal Income. Amongst the 101 reasons Torry (2015) gives for a citizen's or basic income are:

- there would no longer be a distinction between those receiving financial support and those not;
- increased recognition for activities other than (well) paid employment.;
- people in menial, tedious and unsatisfying jobs would not need to work in them for such long hours – people would have a higher degree of autonomy in their lives than they do at the moment. UBI could even kill off low paid menial jobs.
- it might mean that people could choose to work fewer hours in paid employment altogether, creating room for more time to be spent with family, on hobbies and pleasurable activities or in community activities. It would enable non-market activities to flourish that, while not materially productive, nonetheless make life meaningful and have important functions for the wellbeing of people and communities.
- the work that people do at the moment that is not paid, and is predominantly carried out by women (caring, bringing up children, community activism) would be recognised more and be more socially valued. There would be a paradigm shift in what (paid) work means.
- the security offered by UBI would facilitate creativity and flexibility.

Whilst UBI is not the only policy initiative promote to deal with some of the challenges of both recognition and redistribution (see Kagan, 2017a,b) it is gaining traction in many different political circles, from right, green and left, so is worthy of some exploration. This paper will explore some of the thinking around feminist critique of the economy and feminist debates over universal basic income (UBI) to see what, if any lessons there might be for a post growth and steady state future.

### [Feminist critique of the economy](#)

It is widely recognised by feminist and ecological economists that classical economy deals inadequately with reproductive and solidarity activities (Marcel, 2015). The raising of children, the care of the sick and elderly do not feature in economic analyses, essentially because they are not considered to contribute to economic growth. This leads to the bizarre situation that if (mostly) women care for pre-school children there is no recognition of this, but if she pays someone else to care for them, the activity contributes to GDP. Similarly, unpaid housework does not contribute, but paid domestic work does; visiting an elderly neighbour only counts if someone is paid to do this; informal networking in the community only counts if a community practitioner is paid to do it, not if

women do it in the course of their lives. Waring and others have argued this not only a matter of how economic activity is understood but is also a matter of how activity is measured and accounted for (Waring, 1989). Some progress has been made in accounting for some of the work women do (Bjørnholt and Mackay, 2014). However, the situation we still have is one where the great majority of women's use-time and a lot of men's is not thought of as part of the economy and does not reckon in economic analyses, and it is only activity delivered through paid employment that has social status.

Zelleke (2011) argues that the creation of the constructs of the public sphere (Justice, rights and rule of law) as different from the private sphere (love, altruism and privacy) has enabled a focus in political theory (and, I would add, other arenas of discussion) to be on the first and to take little notice of the latter. Feminists have critiqued this separate sphere model for a number of reasons. As Zelleke (2011:29) says:

*“First, the idea of a private domestic sphere allows injustice to flourish within the family – including family violence and the unequal and gendered distribution of power, labour and income. Second, the gendered inequality of the domestic sphere necessarily spills over into the public sphere, where women's disproportionate domestic responsibilities prevent them from competing fairly with men for jobs, income, political power and other forms of influence, and often relegates women to providing most of society's low paid care as well. But the third reason is one that would hold no matter who was primarily responsible for care work in the domestic sphere: the primacy in our moral imaginations and our social institutions of the model of competent, ‘independent’ adults responsible for their ends and actions fails to recognise the enormous amount of work that goes on in the domestic sphere to make the public sphere possible, and ignores the constraints that those who are primarily responsible for unpaid care confront when they enter the public sphere and are unable to leave the domestic sphere fully behind (Fraser, 1997)”.*

Gender differences in access to paid employment, the kinds of work open to them enabling them to combine paid work with reproductive and household work, and the gender pay gap for those in paid employment, means that women are disadvantaged economically, with female headed single parent households being the worst off. (The situation has got worse in recent years as so-called ‘austerity’ measures have substantially worsened women's economic situation. Jobs have gone; public sector (largely women's work) jobs have been cut; zero hours low paid work has increased; benefits have been cut.) Thus from a feminist perspective, there are problems of both redistribution of social and economic resources, as well as recognition and social status accorded to caring work. Two of the central claims for UBI are that it can help with (i) redistribution, ensuring every individual has an

adequate maintenance income and the availability of good quality jobs are shared out more evenly, and (ii) social status, with unpaid reproductive care and community work having a greater social value and shared more equitably between men and women. It would seem a feminist dream ticket.

Let's look in more detail about feminist takes on UBI.

### UBI and gender

As always, there are more than one feminist perspectives. McLean (2015) sums up different feminist perspectives on UBI. - Advocates have pointed to the potential for BI to correct the paid work bias of contemporary social security systems and to increase women's economic autonomy and power within the household. (for example, McKay, 2005; Zelleke, 2011). Critics have argued that BI will do nothing to directly challenge the gendered division of labour and may well reinforce it (Gheaus, 2008; Robeyns, 2001). As such, she suggests, the feminist debate about BI is in some ways a microcosm of wider feminist controversies regarding how the state can recognize the unpaid work women largely do without reinforcing existing inequalities, also known as Wollstonecraft's Dilemma (Lister, 1995). Mclean put it like this

*"A fundamental and enduring conflict of feminist theory has been by what means women can be included as full members of society – either on the basis of a formal 'gender-neutral' equality as sameness with men (which privileges male norms and disadvantages women to the extent that they deviate from them) or on the basis of their difference from men (which risks entrenching gender essentialism)" (McLean, p.3)*

As she points out (McLean, 2015), a key consequence of this is that much of the debate has centred on the labour market-care dimension of gender inequality with three different approaches to policy: (i) the sameness agenda which seeks to remove barriers to women's participation in male dominated spaces and patterns of life (e.g equal opportunity policies); (ii) the difference agenda which seeks to recognise and reward women's entitlement to engage in care work (eg maternity leave, caregiver allowances); (iii) the agenda that attempts to change men's behaviour – 'universal caregiver'(Fraser, 1994) model, (eg paternity leave).

These debates play out in the discussion of potential effects of UBI., which, it can be argued, addresses both gender equality and gender difference standpoints – distribution and recognition.

Advocates of gender equality suggest that UBI would enable men to reduce their time at work and spend more time in caring activities (though the two do not necessarily go together and there is no

evidence that if men do reduce their formal work time their caring work increases). The possibility that UBI might encourage women to move away from the formal work place is seen as a major disadvantage to progress made on the position of women in society and their access to power and authority. As UBI is paid universally and unconditionally, it would provide women with their own source of income and weaken their dependency on male 'breadwinner' partners, thereby making it easier for them to leave abusive relationships and be economically independent (ref).

Advocates of gender difference assert that it is a positive thing that UBI would enable men and women to engage in different lifestyles. Women would not face economic hardship if they did not enter, or reduced their activity in the labour market: indeed a UBI would recognise the time they spend caring for children, neighbours and elders. Evidence from some of the UBI experiments do suggest that women (along with students) are one group that decrease their labour participation alongside a UBI. (ref) A major advantage of UBI, it is claimed, is that it would weaken the social value placed on formal paid employment and strengthen the value placed on unpaid forms of work (Mulligan, 2013). Not only does BI give recognition to unpaid work, when unconditional, it also provides more equitable financial resources.

*[the] unconditional nature of a basic income means no one has to specialize in being a worker or a caregiver in order to fit the citizenship mould or to receive income support. It provides an income and some basic economic security for everyone and is neutral regarding what activities they engage in.*  
McLean, 2015 p.4

In a post growth scenario, it is desirable that all –men and women- reduce their labour market participation, not only to share round those jobs that are available in the context of job losses due to technology, but also in order to devote more time to food growing, care, repair and renovation, participation in friendship and family activities, community building and solidarity activities (traditionally and to different degrees throughout the world, women's work outside the formal economy). Formal labour market participation in a post growth scenario will be less for all and UBI might facilitate this. Furthermore, Mulligan, (2013: 70) shows how UBI would enable greater reciprocal recognition of paid and unpaid work.

*The experience of being valued as part of a community, and partaking in cooperative activities for common goals, is clearly essential to achieving reciprocal recognition. UBI takes the first step in achieving this in post-modern conditions, by removing the financial barriers to self-realisation. In addition to creating the foundations upon which a more symmetrical division of labour might be built, it opens up the debate over the distorted emphasis on paid work. By undermining the strongest*

*and most emotive reasons for prioritising remunerated forms of work, UBI necessitates an overhaul in the manner in which recognition principles are interpreted.*

In this argument, Mulligan points to a wider set of non paid activities, beyond household work and care. Being part of a community and partaking of cooperative activities for common goals is placed centre stage – women’s activities (see Kagan (2017c) for an account of a recent café-type discussion of gender issues in a viable (or post growth) economy).

Most feminist debates about UBI, however, have focused on household and family care at the expense of other forms of care (for the environment, for community for health and so on – see Sabine O’hara’s (2014) suggestion that a wider construction of ‘care’ could be used as an organising ethic for feminist, context-based economy) – all areas of women’s informal and un-recognised activity. This narrow focus on the labour market-care dimension of gender inequality, whilst a crucial topic for feminists, stands in danger of marginalizing other aspects of gender inequality, not only in terms of the entirety of women’s unpaid work, but also in terms of the intersections between gender and class and race, including issues of poverty and the international nature of gender inequality and the particular challenges of life for women in the Global South.

Surprisingly little discussion has been held about other informal work that women do in forming, maintaining and developing informal networks, the social glue creating and sustaining communities.

In a post growth world, all of these concerns will have to be addressed in order to promote a more inclusive scenario and one that goes beyond the gendered inequality of care in the household.

In the UK, contemporary proposals by the RSA, JRF, Compass, Citizens Income Trust, even the Green Party are focused in detail on how a BI would be paid for from existing welfare and other budgets: this is a red herring or a distraction – if Governments want to implement a UBI they will find a way of doing so whilst retaining existing social safety nets. Whilst debates rage about exactly how UBI would be paid for (see Kagan 2016; Torry, 2016), such technicalities are the least of it. If we assume a UBI is successfully implemented, and either because of the political will to end poverty or paid working time for all is less, because of technological changes, what will people do? How will household tasks change? How will we build community solidarity, create and do more work for local community good and engage in socially useful leisure and craft activities? Who will do what and how will social values shift? Most importantly, who currently has the resources (personal, networking, capacity for emotional labour) on which to build? Well, the answer to the last question is, of course, women.

## Women, Informal work, community and community building

The roles that women play in creating, supporting and sustaining communities across the globe vary, but wherever we look we can see that it is women who form and nurture the informal networks that underpin 'community' and communities. As Hope and Timmel (1996: 5) say, drawing on their extensive participatory development work in different places, '*[w]omen have been the invisible weavers of the web of community...*'

In the UK and in most of the core capitalist countries, community life is gendered with men and women occupying different spaces and roles in particular ways (Dominelli, 2006; Fisher, 2013; Gilchrist, 2009) (in other places community life is also gendered, of course, but the roles occupied by men and women vary).

In the UK, according to the most relevant official survey of volunteering (which does not cover all unpaid work by any means and notwithstanding the care that needs to be taken over volunteering statistics Baines and Hardill, 2008 ) women do more *informal* volunteering than men, and are considerably more likely to engage in community-caring roles (including giving informal advice, giving practical help, sitting with and caring for others, baby sitting and childrearing). Men feature more in formal advice giving and advocacy (NCVO, 2016). This pattern has been formally recorded over a number of years. Furthermore, in terms of engagement with cultural activities, women are more likely to engage with libraries (which provide community meeting spaces and activities ) and the arts (DCMS, 2016). This is important as increasingly arts activities are used in processes of community development (e.g Verbeij, 2013).

Through the informal, unpaid work that they do, often linked to childcare, faith groups or to local issues, Gilchrist (2009:98) notes that it is *women's emotional labour [that] creates and maintains networks'* within community settings. Furthermore, a great deal of the low paid work that women do, whether it is in social care, domestic help, supermarkets and shops, or as founders and members of tenants and residents groups (Lowndes, 2004), enables them to connect with and between others. As the community guardian roles of post and milk deliveries, road sweeping, rubbish collections and so on disappear, it is women's roles that have taken their place. They hold the understanding of the people in a locality, their habits and interests. Of course, the category 'women' is intersected with class, race, (dis)ability and so on. Lister recognised this when discussing the role of women in political activism. Whilst received wisdom is that men are more politically active than women, she suggests:

*The picture that emerges from a variety of more 'bottom up' accounts is that of a rich and inspiring nexus of citizenship-enhancing activities. A number of British studies have painted a vivid portrait of working-class women organising around issues of daily life, often unsupported by men. The pattern is evident in different configurations world-wide and among different groups of women. For example, in her study of Black women's organisations, Julia Sudbury (1998) uses an explicitly broad definition of politics, rooted in Black women activists' 'everyday theorising', to highlight the extent and range of their political activity (Lister, 2005, 21-22)*

Women, then, via issues of daily life, are crucial to the maintenance of social relations and generate social capital from wider family and friends, and others in the community, (in contrast to men who are more likely to depend on their partners, even their mothers -Boneham and Sixsmith, 2006). This is not to suggest, an essentialised notion of womanhood or female experience, and Gilchrist (2009) is careful to challenge any notion of such roles as being in any way inherent or 'natural'. They are derived from the ways that family and community roles and activities are structured and take place within sets of cultural assumptions and expectations. We could say that it is, indeed, women that generate social capital within a community (Kagan et al., 2000).

However, there are problems with the concept of social capital.

Lowndes (2000) points out that that, with its focus on community associations, (the Putnam approach to) the theory and practice social capital building fails to consider women's informal networking activities such as those connected to the care of children – but also including those mentioned above. This leads Lister (2005) to eschew the notion of social capital in favour of women's *informal citizenship politics*, which takes place at the interstices of private and public life. Through their active (informal) networking they are engaged in what Joaquim, 1998 refers to as 'everyday life citizenship' (cited in Lister 2005). It is women that keep communities going, building on networks of trust and reciprocity (Lowndes, 2004). Thane (2011) pointed out that in the context of austerity cuts, David Cameron's Big Society agenda (which was designed to 'empower' communities to take direct control of services, and improve their local situations) it would be women who would fill the gaps left by cuts in services.

Women-run community projects would be the ones to support local people in need; grandmothers would step in to care for children, enabling their mothers to find unsocial-hours work. Women have the know-how, the networks and the experiences to maintain communities and make the Big Society work. The Big Society policy programme was short-lived, but the cuts in public services continues. There is still an emphasis on transforming public services to enable communities (for

which read women) to 'take control', driven by the continuing cuts in public services, but disguised as enabling community say and action. In practice what this co-option of community groups into 'partnership work with public service commissioners means, is a reduction in spaces for women to organise around women's issues

Emejulu and Bronstein (2011:283-284 suggest

*... the very process of 'partnership working', bringing together the private, public and community sectors to find solutions to poverty and inequality at a neighbourhood level, seems to undermine the project of radical politics. As community and development organizations get drawn into governance structures, service provision and technical approaches to addressing poverty and exclusion, this appears to simultaneously reduce independence of voice for these organizations and the freedom of spaces outside the state and the market for formulating critiques and mobilizing groups for action.*

Similarly in a wider context, Wilson (2015) critically discusses the ways in which development, explicitly concentrated on women and women's work and their community building, within neoliberal development frameworks, (a process of *gender equality as smart economics*) actually rely upon, extend and deepen gendered inequalities in order to sustain and strengthen processes of global capital accumulation in several ways. For post growth scenarios, we need to heed the lessons from international development and the reliance on women's informal community work when we think about community building.

Since the Big Society, in England we have had community organising (basically community action via networking building) and now asset based community development – community development building on the assets of the community (a large proportion of which is women and their networks) with no need for additional resources. In all of these debates, 'community' is most often thought of in a geographical sense, and the problems of 'who should be involved or engaged is usually left unspecified. Whether we are talking of geographical communities or communities of interest, unless it is an interest that affects mainly men, it is generally women at the forefront (Kagan, 2017).

Such a pivotal role for women might be seen as an opportunity for women to come into their own, for their activities hitherto unrecognised to be recognised and valued, which itself might become more important as paid employment decreases.. Or there could be disproportionate stress on women to do, to teach, to support, to engage in more emotional labour and all the stress this involves (Kagan, 2006) while the men do - what? There are various proxies for knowing what they might do. Take up of paternity leave is very small in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, but where it is

higher, men do take over some more caring, but not necessarily household chores (Haas and Hwang, 2008; Karu and Tremblay, 2018). What men and women do in retirement, during leisure time and during vacations might also help understand what gender differences there may be with less time spent in paid employment – beyond this discussion.

So, at least in the short term, a postgrowth future with greater emphasis on community building, social solidarity and the forming and maintenance of social networks (whether or not we call this social capital) will place more onus on women. UBI may assist in freeing up time away from paid employment to build this future, but it is important to note that a basic income is a top down, individualistic policy platform, and there may be other more effective, bottom up collective mechanisms. They would have to be capable of addressing an economic shift away from growth, a change in social value in favour of care and unpaid work, and redistribution of wealth. It is now up to men to ensure they begin to understand what community building and social solidarity means in practice, and to acquire the motivation and the skills to share in the construction of a post growth future, of caring and of community building, and to avoid just another scenario of women carrying paid employment, caring and household work and an even greater proportion of community building (Roberts, 2010). This may take some time as it will probably involve re-socialisation processes, but if we do not accept deterministic, essentialist perspectives on masculinity, which suggest some fixed notion of masculinity and men's behaviour, consolidated in infancy, it is a task that is possible.

## Conclusion

For a post growth future it is clear we need to change the culture and social value placed on paid employment, and (U)BI might assist with this. McFarland (2018 amongst others suggests more highly paid or professional men could start by eschewing full time paid employment now. Prefiguring a post growth world and prefiguring how use time, once UBI were introduced might be equitably shared between men and women might be a useful stepping stone to a post growth world. The central issue linking these domains for me is the question of whether or not (U)BI is the best way to move towards a post growth society. Any alternatives would have to grapple with the dual issues of recognition and distribution – no easy task. But it cannot be left to the women to do all the work! Whilst we can applaud the essential feminisation of politics and everyday life as Barcelona En Comú describes it (La Comuna, 2018) as we move towards a different way of being, this cannot rely on women – men must play their part and, maybe make the biggest changes.

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