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It's Payback Time for Women

Judith Shulevitz JAN. 8, 2016

A COUNTRY that gives every citizen enough cash to live on whether she needs it or not: It's got to be either a fool's paradise or a profligate Northern European nation. And lo, in November, the Finnish government proposed paying every adult 800 euros or about \$870 a month. Fits of this seemingly irrational generosity, called a universal basic income or U.B.I., are becoming surprisingly common. The Swiss will vote in a referendum on basic income this year. The Dutch city of Utrecht will soon start a basic-income pilot program. Canada's ruling Liberal Party recently adopted a resolution calling for a similar experiment.

Still, it couldn't happen here. Or could it? Over the past few years, a case for the U.B.I. has emerged that could make it appealing not just to the poor, who don't vote in great numbers, but to women, who do.

The feminist argument for a U.B.I. is that it's a way to reimburse mothers and other caregivers for the heavy lifting they now do free of charge. Roughly one-fifth of Americans have children 18 or under. Many also attend to ill or elderly relatives. They perform these labors out of love or a sense of duty, but still, at some point during the diaper-changing or bedpan cleaning, they have to wonder why their efforts aren't seen as "work." They may even ask why they have to pay for the privilege of doing it, by cutting back on their hours or quitting jobs to stay home.

Disproportionately, of course, these caregivers are women. Notwithstanding the advent of the stay-at-home dad, it's still mothers who do most of the invisible labor of cleaning, schlepping, scheduling and listening.

To the extent that mainstream feminism has paid attention to pocketbook issues over the past few decades, it has focused on the workplace: the wage gap, absence of family leave and weak “infrastructure of care,” to use Anne-Marie Slaughter’s phrase. These family-unfriendly facts of life on the job do yank success further out of the reach of women who combine career and children. But the problem is not that employers hate women and children. It’s that they make a common assumption about motherhood: It’s a lifestyle choice, not a wage-worthy job, and no one other than parents should pay for it. Wages for child rearing and housework? When one feminist collective took up that cry in the 1970s, it was more or less drummed out of the second-wave feminist movement, which aimed to get women into the work force, not pay them to stay out of it.

If mothers are glorified hobbyists who produce less value than nonmothers, it follows that they’re getting a free ride on everyone else’s labor. This can lead to tensions between colleagues, and also colors relations between breadwinning husbands and stay-at-home wives, who notoriously have less bargaining power in their households.

I’d argue that this view of motherhood gets it exactly backward. Actually, it’s society that’s getting a free ride on women’s unrewarded contributions to the perpetuation of the human race. As Marx might have said had he deemed women’s work worth including in his labor theory of value (he didn’t), “reproductive labor” (as feminists call the creation and upkeep of families and homes) is the basis of the accumulation of human capital. I say it’s time for something like reparations.

It’s an odd kind of reparations, you may object, that goes to fathers as well as mothers, the unattached as well as those with family responsibilities. But entertain this radical proposition: The universal basic income is a necessary condition for a just society, for it recognizes the fact that most of us — men, women, parents and nonparents — do a great deal of unpaid work to sustain the general well-being. If we’re not raising children, then we may be going to school, or volunteering around the neighborhood.

Politically, the U.B.I. looks a lot more plausible than a subsidy aimed only at mothers, because, as Social Security and Medicare make clear, policies have more staying power when perceived as general entitlements rather than free cash for free riders. Critics on the right would dismiss a mothers’ annuity as a handout to welfare queens. Critics on the left might see it as enshrining traditional gender

norms. A universal basic income would sidestep both of these objections.

I do not want to create the impression that feminists dominate this debate. On the contrary: They're an overlooked part of a much larger conversation that has been going on for centuries.

In 1797, Thomas Paine declared that nations should give every 21-year-old a lump sum because those who inherit land have an unfair advantage over those who don't. By the middle of the last century, economists and leaders on both sides of the political spectrum were proposing minimum incomes.

The libertarian hero Friedrich A. Hayek supported "a sort of floor below which nobody need fall." Milton Friedman called for a negative income tax in which, if you reported less than a certain amount, the Internal Revenue Service would pay you. (Our current earned-income tax credit resembles Friedman's plan, but only for people who, well, earn income. The negative income tax would have gone to the unemployed as well.) In 1969, President Richard Nixon proposed the Family Assistance Plan, a small annual stipend in lieu of welfare — \$1,600 and some \$800 in food stamps for a family of four. His bill was passed by the House of Representatives but died in the Senate Finance Committee.

Basic income proposals are sprouting up again, from the right as well as the left. Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute thinks a guaranteed income could replace the welfare state. Libertarians want to get the government out of the private lives of the poor. Andy Stern, the former head of the Service Employees International Union, who has a book coming out soon on universal basic income, argues that it would offer the economic stability that the labor movement won't be able to provide as jobs disappear — though not, he says, if Social Security and Medicare are also cut.

It's easy to see why basic income proposals are gaining steam right now. For one thing, the gap between rich and poor Americans is the widest on record.

For another, smart machines and the "gig economy" seem poised to throw millions out of work. A 2013 Oxford University study concluded that computers would replace humans in nearly half of all occupations in the United States within as little as two decades. We're not just talking about blue-collar jobs. Computers able to perform nonroutine cognitive tasks could wipe out middle-management positions such as accountant or transportation inspector, as well as many skilled

service jobs, some of them typically associated with women. The Oxford study lists restaurant hostess and legal secretary, among others.

That's why some members of the Silicon Valley elite, better known for their contempt for government, advocate all-inclusive, no-strings-attached cash grants. In November, Robin Chase, the co-founder and former chief executive of Zipcar, called for a basic income. Venture capitalists like Albert Wenger of Union Square Ventures and John Lilly of Greylock Partners, which invests in LinkedIn and Airbnb, have said that it's time to start thinking about a U.B.I. The founder of HowStuffWorks.com, Marshall Brain, even wrote a basic-income novel called "Manna." It contrasts a nightmare world in which robots are managers and workers slaves with a utopian settlement in the Australian desert in which citizens receive a guaranteed share of the wealth created by such robots and devote themselves to dreaming up innovative new technologies. It's the Silicon Valley version of heaven.

THIS is all very nice, skeptics say, but the U.B.I. still represents a moral hazard. Give people money for nothing, and the lazy will grow lazier and the rest of us will be bankrupted.

But that does not appear to be the case. On the contrary: The U.B.I. gives workers less reason to loll about at home than do perversely disincentivizing policies like the one whereby a dollar earned is a dollar cut from a welfare check. Research suggests that, rather than weaken the will to work, unconditional regular disbursements let people manage their careers more wisely.

In five famous studies on the negative income tax conducted in the United States and Canada in the 1970s, a minimum income did bring down work hours a bit, partly because the unemployed took longer to find new jobs. Researchers speculate that they were holding out for positions that better matched their skills. In the United States, male breadwinners scaled back by as much as 9 percent a year. In Canada, they hardly cut back at all. In both countries, teenagers stayed in school longer. And women with children did spend up to 30 percent less time on the job.

The U.B.I. has feminist critics as well as supporters, and they don't like that finding. The U.B.I. would encourage women to drop out of the work force, they say, ceding the ground feminism has fought so hard for. But that concern strikes me as, well, paternalistic. Women should have more choices, not fewer. So should

men. Equality between the sexes should not require everyone to conform to traditionally male patterns of employment.

Besides, basic income policies have been shown to mitigate specifically female kinds of poverty.

When cash-transfer experiments were conducted in poor towns in India, girls gained more weight and increased the time they spent at school at greater rates than boys, probably because when cash is scarce, the girls get less to eat and are kept home more.

In the United States, as Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer showed in their book on extreme poverty, “\$2.00 a Day,” the process of qualifying for food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the welfare-to-work program created in 1996, can be so demanding, bewildering and degrading that many applicants simply give up. And who are the patient souls who wait in those daylong lines, pee into cups for drug tests or go home empty-handed? Women, more often than not, since there are more than four times as many families run by single mothers as by single fathers, and a third more households headed by women are on the dole than those run by men.

As for stay-at-home mothers supported by their partners, a basic income would let them put aside money of their own. Most retirement-savings instruments are linked to paychecks, which means that so-called nonworking parents have no way to pay into Social Security, 401(k)'s or I.R.A.s. A basic income would let them save for old age. For nonwage-earning mothers trapped in abusive relationships, cash would make it easier for them to leave.

How much the basic income can accomplish depends on how it's configured. A truly universal guaranteed minimum income would be expensive. Say the U.B.I. was \$12,000 a year per citizen over 18, and \$4,000 per child. At that rate, we'd need about \$3 trillion, roughly 80 percent of the total federal budget. The program would be even more effective, and more just, if children qualified for full stipends, since child rearing drives so many people — so many women! — into poverty. (It's unlikely that this would produce a baby boom, since even a handsome payout would hardly cover what children cost these days.)

The price tag for these cash transfers would be partly offset by savings. Most anti-poverty programs would become redundant. Bureaucracies tasked with

weeding out cheaters would melt away (though, unfortunately, so would the jobs devoted to weeding). The better-off would pay back parts of their grants in taxes in proportion to their earned income. Moreover, a basic income would reduce the ill effects of poverty and therefore the cost to society of bad public health, crime and incarceration. Basic-income experiments have shown that recipients make greater use of medical services and break the law less often than nonrecipients. And then there's the boost to the economy that would result from poor people with cash in hand buying more goods.

Some of the many strategies proposed for raising the rest of the money include a relatively high flat tax; the closing of tax loopholes; a value-added tax; the elimination of middle-class entitlements such as the mortgage-interest deduction and retirement benefits; a careful paring back of Social Security; a tax on speculative financial transactions; and a carbon tax. We could also remit money reaped from the exploitation of public resources. Alaska, which already pays its citizens something very like a basic income, sends every adult and child a varying annual dividend of around \$2,000 from a fund that invests royalties paid to the state by oil and natural gas producers.

The truth, though, is that the U.B.I. is — yes — a form of redistribution. We'll be able to afford it only when we decide it's worth affording. But that's just what we ought to decide. We should cut back on military spending if we have to, or raise taxes on the rich. The political will for such a huge restructuring of our economy would require a fundamental reassessment of the relationship between the state and the people. Maybe, like Thomas Paine, we'd start to think of these wealth transfers as a right of citizenship instead of an insurance policy against financial disaster.

Even if we started small to get people used to the idea by offering way-below-poverty-level sums (\$6,000, say), these would still buoy American families struggling not to slip underwater.

The U.B.I. would also edge us toward a more gender-equal world. The extra cash would make it easier for a dad to become the primary caregiver if he wanted to. A mom with a job could write checks for child care and keep her earnings, too. Stay-at-home parents would have money in the bank, more clout in the family, and the respect that comes from undertaking an enterprise with measurable value. And we'd have established the principle that the work of love is not priceless at all,

but worth paying for.

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