**A Feminist Case for Basic Income Guarantee**

I was very excited, revved up, when I decided to develop a feminist case for a basic income for this Congress. There was something **so obvious** about this, however, that I wondered what really needed to be said. Yet, I knew some feminists had written against it. How could they?

Then I had this memory, that started out fuzzily and then came into full relief: my own adamant opposition in the 1970s to the Wages for Housework campaign, an antipathy I shared with socialist feminists, liberal feminists, most feminists. How then, had I gotten from hither to yon?

Let me take a couple of minutes to introduce you to the Wages for Housework campaign, or to bring it back into focus for those who lived through those years.

The champion of Wages for Housework, Selma James, came to Canada at least twice to drum up support, twice in Montreal, and I attended both of those meetings. Hundreds of women attended each, the first at McGill where she shared a platform with the controversial American McGill professor, Marlene Dixon, and the Canadian economist, Monica Townson. James and Dixon worked the assembly to develop a motion supporting wages for housework. They pilloried Townson for speaking against it, and many of us sat bewildered, still not sure about what we thought. What a rancorous occasion; the supporters outlasted everyone else and got their motion passed. As we discovered, Wages for Housework was intended for all women, married, single, those with and without children. Indeed, its supporters protested any move to encourage men to share in domestic labour, including childcare.

The next Selma James occasion took place at Concordia University where students had invited her for a hefty speaker’s fee. This time James arrived with her own coterie, A Black woman for W 4 H, a Lesbian for W 4 H, even for, as we dubbed her, a sex kitten for W 4 H who draped herself across several desks in the large auditorium. The historian Veronica Strong-Boag chaired what was intended to be a debate: two microphones, alternating speakers, each with 5 minutes. When the first speaker from the W 4 H reached the end of her 5 minutes, and the chair tried to have her step down, James and her supporters mounted a terrific protest. I remember James screaming: “I will not let you silence this black woman.” And later, “I will not let you silence this lesbian.” Definitely the most rancorous political meeting that I have ever attended. When the Chair proved unable to moderate the so-called debate she closed the entire session. The students who had brought James at a princely fee were shattered, many sitting in tears.

Remembering all this, and my adamant opposition not just to the tactics of W 4 H, but also to the very substance of the idea, I asked myself: why I was now such an unequivocal supporter of a Basic Income? At the least one could say that the W 4 H is subsumed within the idea of a Basic Income since we seek an income that enables us to look after each other.

I contacted a couple of friends to ask why we were against W4H. VSB replied in an email that it was “because of the deep essentialism of the WH Group; no mention for example of men getting to parent if they were better at it.” Maureen O’Neil, who directed Status of Women Canada under 4 PMs, wrote “oh dear, I hated wages due housework as well. I used to say that the state had no interest in ironed sheets.”

But I think there are other major reasons, besides its essentialism, why my support for Basic Income is 180 degrees from my opposition to W 4 H. In the 1970s feminists of virtually every political persuasion—I was a socialist feminist- believed that women had to strive for—and needed--economic independence as delivered by paid work. The campaigns were for equal pay for work of equal value, entrance to the professions and the trades, 24 hour daycare to accommodate those doing shift work, attacking all forms of patriarchy in the law especially family law, promoting gender equality in marriage including shared domestic labour. By the middle of the 1970s the extent of wife battery had been revealed, and this added impetus to the fight for economic independence. Women needed to be able to up and leave, with their children.

All these measures—most of them unrealized in their entirety--remain important. But we also see the playing out of the unintended consequences of these campaigns. For politicians and judges bought into the idea that women should be in the work force in ever greater number---but never instituted publicly funded daycare for all-- let alone 24/7.

Some governments, notably Harris’ Conservatives in Ontario, chased single women with children off welfare because they should be ‘self supporting.’ At the same time, the corporate and professional world never changed, making no allowance for the care of children, and yes Housework. Women lawyers left the up-market field that expected them to work 12 hour days with no allowance for children, let alone sick children. Justice Bertha Wilson wrote in her report for the Canadian Bar Association (1993) that “the suitability of future partners for law firms is determined within a legal culture that has been shaped by men, for men, and is predicated on historical work patterns that assume that lawyers do not have significant family responsibilities.” The law establishment pilloried Wilson, warning that her recommendations would lead to the end of civilization.

And—unpredicted by most including feminists like me- better paying jobs, job security, and benefits declined precipitously in the ensuing decades, and with that the opportunity to support oneself and one’s family. Legitimating the increasingly parsimonious workplace including the contraction of union jobs, neo-liberalism expanded its toehold to become the dominant discourse from coast to coast to coast.

Many jobs have also been entirely eliminated by their removal off-shore, and by technology. We can well believe those who say this is only the tip of the iceberg. Witness the guilt reaction of those developing robots in Silicone Valley, people who now call for a basic income for everyone.

Indeed, even the income security provided to many women through marriage was eroded through skyrocketing separation, divorce, and single motherhood. Men refused to pay alimony (and often fought against child support) to women ‘who should be independent’. As Mary Morton found in her research, “ Judges treat divorcing couples as equal NOW. Unlike men, women and their children are overwhelmingly poorer after separation and divorce, while divorced men (usually the non custodial parent) are usually better off financially after divorce. (Dividing the Wealth, Sharing the Poverty). Mary Cremin, a lawyer with whom I worked at the NWC in Montreal, declared one day that it was easier to convince a woman who was being battered to leave her husband than the affluent woman in Westmount. The former took her welfare with her, the latter worried about her children’s school and summer camp fees, not to mention her big house.

**What remains, then, from the most important feminist goal of the 1970s: that women needed to be economically independent?**

In our society that still expects women to do the lion’s share of the domestic labour, that pays women less than men, where marriage is no longer a protection once it dissolves (and often not even when it is ongoing), feminists like me consciously or unconsciously have had to shift or at least expand what we support and struggle for. From this perspective a Basic Income Guarantee is indeed a feminist policy, that at an adequate level delivers economic independence for women.

The second-wave feminist in me is alive and well. I support laws and policies that expand women’s occupational options and their right to equal treatment in the marketplace. I encourage young women to seek paid work outside the home. Then and now I see plenty of problems with full-time motherhood. Second-wave feminism provided me with the legitimation to pursue educational and career goals. But it was a supportive husband, willing and able to pay the freight for me and our children that made them realizable. There is irony here as feminists like me castigated marriage as the primary institution for women’s oppression.

Today men and women may be more likely to strive for equality within marriage but they are surrounded by social practices and ideologies that make this difficult. Moreover, fewer women and men choose marriage, and when they do, those marriages often end, whether badly or not. There are fewer jobs, more of them part-time, precarious, with low wages and no benefits.

In this new dispensation, a Basic Income Guarantee would provide not only income security but also a launching pad for women, especially mothers with young children, to pursue their dreams for a better and more fulfilled life, whether academic, creative, as community workers--or as makers of the next social revolutions.