

## **Wages for Housework: Basic Income as Basic Capital for the Care Economy**

Presentation to the session on Basic Income and Gender, Care, and Social Reproduction at the 2021 Korea Basic Income Fair/Conference

Thank you for this invitation to return to speak at this conference. When I spoke to the Basic Income Fair in 2019 I spoke on the role that Basic Income could play in creating a gender egalitarian society. I argued then that the key to understanding Basic Income's contribution to gender equality was its reversal of the typical prioritization of the *market sphere* over *the sphere of the family*.

Today I want to elaborate on the relation of these two spheres of human activity: the *family sphere of unconditional care* and *the market sphere of the conditional wage*. I want to do this by discussing the theories of a small international women's group from the 1970s and their movement for **Wages for Housework**.

The **Wages for Housework** movement was launched in Italy in 1972 by a group of Marxist feminists led by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici. In Federici's words, its goal was "to open a process of international feminist mobilization that would force the state to recognize **that domestic work is work**" and to **remunerate** it accordingly. The International Feminist Collective brought a critical *Marxist* perspective to the analysis of the place of housework in the larger system of capitalist domination, arguing that the foundation of "**productive,**" **waged, and typically male labor** *in the factory* is **unpaid, "reproductive," and typically female labor** *in the home*. This claim is now widely accepted in theory, and is echoed in the work of many well-known feminist political theorists and economists.

But the Wages for Housework movement made a *further* claim that is *critical* to the argument for an *unconditional* Basic Income. The theorists behind this movement argued not only that the liberation of *women* required recognition of the value of this “reproductive” labor, but that the emancipation of *wage earners*, *including male wage earners*, was *also dependent* on the recognition of unpaid, **reproductive labor**. They did so by describing housework as a **hidden site** of capitalist exploitation, **equal in importance** to the site of **the factory**. For this group of theorists, “Class struggle and feminism are one and the same thing, with feminism expressing the rebellion of *that section of the class* without whom the class struggle cannot be *generalised, broadened and deepened*.” I argue that this perspective is *critical* for advancing the argument for an unconditional Basic Income in capitalist societies, and for understanding how the Basic Income should be financed, and by whom.

The movement’s analysis of the *capitalist* exploitation of women’s labor began with a 1972 essay called “Women and the Subversion of Community” by Dalla Costa, an Italian professor of political science. In this essay, Dalla Costa acknowledged that the oppression of women *preceded* the shift from peasant economies to capitalism, but that capitalism had both *intensified their exploitation* and created *the possibility of their liberation*. Prior to capitalism, men were, of course, “despotic heads of the patriarchal family,” but *all* members of peasant families shared the same unfreedom. Production and reproduction were *co-located* in the extended family home, with *all family members* seen as contributors to agricultural production.

With the advent of the factory and rising overall standards of living, production and reproduction were separated, and those who did not “procreate and service” wage workers were “expelled” from the nuclear family home--children to schools and the aged to old-age homes and dependence on state pensions. Wage-earning men became “free” and “independent,” and their “free” waged labor created a new oppositional dependency of women, children, and the aged.

Dalla Costa argued that women’s labor in the home is “*essential* to the production of surplus value” because the home is the site of the *reproduction and socialization* of labor. Far from being “*a personal service outside of capital*,” as patriarchal ideology makes it appear, women’s labor in the home *is part of the capitalist assembly line*, as capital requires all “to function in ways that are, *if not immediately*, then *ultimately* profitable to the expansion and extension of **the rule of capital**.” The nuclear family, a family form created by industrial capitalism, is “*the very pillar* of capitalist organization of work,” and it functions as a “social factory.” “The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he and she will never be anything **but** workers.”

“Since Marx,” Dalla Costa writes, “it has been clear that ... the foundation of capitalist society was *the wage laborer and his or her direct exploitation*. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of *the non-wage laborer* been organized.”

This *segregation* of capitalist labor and *the obscuring* of the true nature of women’s work excludes women from working class movements and fractures the working class in ways

that serve the interests of Capital. Housewives are unable to strike, and men, soothed by the comforts of the home, are less likely to. A true working class movement needs to consider housewives and housework as *central, not secondary*, to class struggle.

Dalla Costa and her colleague Silvia Federici argued further that *all women are “housewives,”* even single women or married women with domestic help, because responsibility for reproduction and service of workers has been naturalized as a feminine trait. “We might not serve one man,” she writes, “but we are all in a servant relation with respect to the entire male world.” Even women who work (or simply walk) outside the home are expected to *soothe* men, providing unpaid emotional labor. Thus the demand for wages for housework is both a laborist and feminist demand for recognition that women’s work, whether housework or *the broader category* of “emotional labor,” is *work*, not an expression of women’s natural desire to serve men any more than factory work is an expression of men’s natural desire to serve capital.

Furthermore, women cannot escape their responsibility for reproductive work by taking on productive work. “We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives,” they wrote, referring to what has come to be known as working women’s “second shift”: women performing the bulk of the domestic labor in the evening after both husband and wife work outside the home during the day.

This grounding of the analysis of women’s exploitation in a larger system of capitalist exploitation explains why the movement rejected the “myth” prevalent in the

largely middle class Western Women's Movement at the time, "of liberation through work."

"Work is still work, whether inside or outside the home. The independence of the wage earner means only being a 'free individual' *for capital*, no less for women than for men. Those who advocate that the liberation of the working class woman lies in her getting a job outside the home are part of the problem, not the solution.

Dalla Costa articulates the demand for Wages for Housework as **both** a reform *under* capitalism and a revolutionary perspective *against* capitalism. She recognizes that demanding wages for housework risks looking like a desire "to entrench the condition of institutionalized slavery," she writes. But she notes too that the Wages for Housework demand *radicalizes women*, who can no longer be placated by a meager monthly allowance.

[T]he demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploitation. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand for wages for housework. This gives at once *an indication for struggle, a direction in organizational terms* in which oppression and exploitation, situation of caste and class, find themselves insolubly linked.

The *practical, continuous* translation of this perspective is the task the movement must face.

While Dalla Costa's writings were foundational to the launch of the Wages for Housework campaign, it is Federici who became the movement's most persuasive theorist, and whose articulation of the Wages for Housework demand reveals it to be a nascent call for Basic Income.

It was Federici who extended the concept of the gendered division of labor to an underlying opposition of “a ‘working class’ to a ‘non-working’ class. In liberal welfare states in particular, the non-working “underclass” has frequently been portrayed as *parasitic* on the work of the working class in their reliance on social welfare benefits paid for by taxes on waged labor. Federici claimed that “ultimately the social weakness of the *wageless* has been and is the weakness of *the entire working class* with respect to capital.”

In this way, Federici and other Wages for Housework theorists demonstrated that by adopting the housewives’ perspective, rather than limiting their analysis to the comparatively narrow question of how *women* can achieve equality with *men*, expands inevitably to the much broader question of how *labor* can advance its interests against *capital*.

For Federici, the demand for *wages* for housewives was critical in defining the movement as a revolutionary movement *against* capital, not a reform *under* capital. “A wage,” she writes, “is not just a bit of money, but is the expression of the power relation between capital and the working class.” The demand for a wage outside of productive work is a demand for a new relation between capital and labor. In Federici’s words:

Many times the difficulties and ambiguities that women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the fact that they reduce wages for housework to a *thing, a lump of money*, instead of viewing it as a *political perspective*....To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society....The problem with this position is that in our imagination we usually add a bit of money to the wretched lives we have now and then ask ‘so what?’ **on the false premise that we could ever get that money without at the**

**same time revolutionizing--in the process of struggling for it--all our family and social relations.**

For this reason, the Wages for Housework demand is not only a revolutionary perspective, but “*the only* revolutionary perspective from a feminist viewpoint.” Unlike male workers’ demands for higher wages, which accept and reinforce the relations of production under capitalism, the demand of housewives for *wages outside of productive work* “forces capital to restructure social relations in terms more favorable to us and consequently more favorable to the unity of the class.”

Implicit in this critique is the assertion that the gendered division of labor into a “productive, wage-earning” class and a “dependent, reproductive” class, has allowed *capital* to shed its responsibility for the reproduction of labor. Whereas under serfdom and even slavery the owner of capital had to provide the serf or slave enough compensation to provide for their reproduction--which in practice meant the support of their families, who also shared in productive work--under industrial capitalism the wage is tied entirely to the *productivity* of the wage-earner, and in capital-rich economies, the wage-earner is always threatened by the possibility of capital substitution or the outsourcing of production to the third world, where wages are lower. A *minority* of wage workers have been able to demand a fully reproductive family wage from capital--or, more likely, has been coopted with this higher wage by capital, in order to divide the working class whose unity could force a restructuring of relations between capital and labor on terms much more favorable to the entire working class.

In many discussions about Basic Income, its ability to compensate unpaid care work is seen as a bonus, another feature alongside its ability to support an increasingly precarious wage-earning labor force in the face of growing automation. The Wages for Housework movement and the analysis of its leading theorists instead centers the experience of women and the value of care work in the movement for a Basic Income. Furthermore, it suggests that Basic Income might be better conceived as *Basic Capital*, as its *implementation* should result in the redistribution not of income from *wage-earners* but a redistribution of *capital* and the power *capital* represents, from capitalists. *Private capital*, as Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, has a *social power*--the power to dominate the proletariat and command its labor on terms beneficial to the capitalist class. Redistributing this power is the revolutionary potential of an unconditional Basic Income, and the articulation of a Basic Income as an unconditional wage for reproductive work, rather than as a supplement to an inadequate wage for productive work, makes this revolutionary potential clear.

Thank you.