



## The Feminist Case for a Universal Basic Income

Jessica Flanigan

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The case for a basic income, a policy that would give all citizens cash payments at regular intervals throughout their lives, is gaining traction. Prominent tech entrepreneurs like [Elon Musk](#), academics across the ideological spectrum from [Philippe Van Parijs](#) to [Charles Murray](#), labor organizers like [Andy Stern](#), and policymakers such as [Michael Tubbs](#), the 27-year-old mayor of Stockton, California, [support basic income policies](#) as a way of reducing poverty and mitigating the negative impact of unemployment due to automation. But they understate the feminist case for giving people cash. Proponents of the UBI would do well to acknowledge the gender implications of the policy, and feminists, in turn, should throw their support behind the movement.

Here are the top three reasons UBI is a feminist cause:

### 1. Women Are More Likely to Be Poor

Globally, [women are more likely to live in extreme poverty than men](#). In the [United States](#), [women as a group are poorer than men](#) due to the economic burdens associated with caregiving and the segregation of women into “pink-collar” industries that typically pay less than male-dominated industries. One of the main benefits of implementing a UBI in the U.S. and elsewhere is that [giving people cash is a relatively direct and effective way to fight poverty](#).

The basic income is also a matter of economic justice for women as a whole. While [capitalism has been beneficial to women on balance](#), the current system reflects historical patterns of female exclusion from labor markets and policies that denied [property rights](#) to women. For example, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, married women lacked legal protections for their property rights under the legal doctrine of [coverture](#). And [until the 1980s](#), husbands retained unilateral control over marital property in some jurisdictions. As I [have argued elsewhere](#), a UBI would make capitalism more just by compensating those who live with the legacy of historical and enduring economic injustices.

And because a basic income would make the decision to work more voluntary, women would no longer choose to remain in toxic jobs solely because they can’t afford not to. In this way, a UBI could address gender-based mistreatment in workplaces. By freeing women of their economic dependence on employers, a UBI would also improve women’s bargaining positions, enabling them to negotiate for more flexible hours or better conditions.

But [a UBI would not discourage work to an extent that would undermine the economy](#). People would still need to work to afford most consumer goods and luxuries. And unlike minimum wage requirements, touted by Fight for \$15 activists, a UBI neither raises the cost of employing

low-income workers relative to other workers nor disproportionately burdens employers to provide a decent standard of living for people in their communities. With an even starting ground, the opportunities to move beyond the lowest-paying work could be more readily available to marginalized workers who've been left out for too long.

## 2. Women Could Make Unfettered Decisions About How to Structure Their Families and Lives

Child care is extraordinarily expensive, and women, especially single moms, end up shouldering an enormous burden for this cost. Some parents who would prefer to work are unable to because they cannot afford quality child care for their kids. Women are more likely to leave the workforce for this reason than men. A UBI for mothers and children would enable women who want to work to pay for child care.

In addition, a UBI (including child benefits) would formally recognize and reward socially valuable labor that people currently perform outside of the paid economy, such as caregiving for children, disabled people, and elderly relatives. The UBI could amount to “wages for housework,” something feminists in the 1970s pushed for.

Furthermore, because a UBI aims to pay all individuals and not households, it allows people to make decisions about marriage and cohabitation based their intrinsic desires, not based on tax policies such as the “marriage penalty” that working couples currently face or means-tested welfare programs that withhold benefits from women when their household income increases after marriage.

A further benefit for families? With an added, guaranteed boost to their income, women in abusive relationships would have the financial security to leave, even if they lack qualifications or credentials that would enable them to support themselves and their families. UBI would do more than almost any other economic policy imaginable to make women less susceptible to abuse both in the workplace and at home.

## 3. Respect: Universal, Rather Than Targeted Assistance, Will Defy Stereotypes

Historically, feminists not only critiqued outright sexism but also the paternalism of efforts to protect women from the world by robbing them of their autonomy. Paternalism has long been used to justify policies that limit women's and other marginalized people's choices, like bans on abortion, or sex work, or women working in dangerous industries, on the grounds that they are incapable of deciding for themselves how to live their lives. Today, many social policies in the U.S. are influenced by extremely paternalistic thinking that perpetuates discriminatory stereotypes about women's abilities to make informed and reasonable decisions for themselves.

Conservative complaints about welfare recipients spending benefits on junk food and luxuries have been part of a more general racialized narrative, which has informed existing welfare policy and also perpetuated offensive and stigmatizing stereotypes about members of marginalized groups, especially women of color. But liberals who support limiting the provision of benefits to housing, food, and health care are subject to the same charges of paternalism when they advocate for in-kind benefit policies (such as food transfers and food vouchers) that perpetuate a politics of suspicion and mistrust, instead of supporting cash benefit programs.

Most of the arguments against UBI also ring of paternalism. How could we trust that low-income women would use the money to do the things I've detailed here? Low-income people, like the

rest of their fellow citizens, are generally the best judges of whether a profession or purchase is in their overall interest, and the evidence suggests that recipients of cash transfers generally spend their income on necessities. Trusting women and all people with the right to spend their money how they see fit, as UBI allows, would push back against decades of paternalistic social policy.

UBI activists still disagree about whether UBI is a right or a benefit, whether it should be provided in addition to or instead of other benefits, and about how large the UBI should be. But the core case in favor of the UBI—that it has the potential to significantly alleviate poverty and liberate all citizens from many of the injustices associated with the current economic order—is a case that all feminists should get behind.