



Gender inequality in times of COVID-19 – give women cash

17 Apr 2020

The following article is authored by Guy Standing.

A basic income system is not just desirable as a response to the coronavirus pandemic and associated economic crisis. It is essential, in both rich countries and developing countries.

However, amidst the crisis of deaths and morbidity, one aspect of what is happening has been marginalized. The global lock-down has resulted in a surge of domestic violence and abuse of women, which is obviously a sad reflection on society and humanity.

In that context, a basic income system – if appropriately designed and implemented – could have profoundly beneficial effects. Some of these have been shown in pilots in which this writer has been involved, as in India and Namibia, and some have been shown in other pilots, as analysed elsewhere. The results have powerful lessons for those now contemplating the introduction of a basic income.

A key point is that the basic income must be paid to everybody in the community and paid in cash to each person individually: not given to “households” or to “families”. If the beneficiary is someone nominated as the “household head”, it will usually be a man, which would merely reproduce gendered hierarchies and patriarchal relations. And the basic income must be equal for all women and men, with smaller amounts for each child paid to the mother or surrogate mother.

Working with SEWA, the Self-Employed Women’s Association of India, we insisted on these design features in our pilots in Madhya Pradesh, where over 6,000 men, women and children were provided with modest basic incomes over 18 months. When the outcomes were compared with what happened to similar people in similar communities where no basic incomes were paid the results were emphatic.

Girl children’s nutrition and health improved more than boys’; girls’ school attendance and

performance improved more than boys', particularly among teenagers. Women's health improved more than men's, although men's health improved too. Women's economic activity increased significantly, so that many were able to take up independent income-earning work. And at the end, when all men and women were asked in the evaluation survey whether they thought men or women had gained more from the basic income, a big majority of both men and women said women. Similar results were found in African experiments.

In rich countries, such as Canada, similar findings have emerged. In addition, one of the strongest findings from negative income tax experiments in the United States in the 1970s was that the payments gave some women the means to end abusive relationships and become independent. (Ironically, a steep apparent increase in marital break-ups in two of the experiments – later shown to be a statistical error – was a major factor in killing political support for guaranteed income in the US.)

Almost definitionally, a properly designed basic income system will reduce gender-based inequality, because on average the payment will represent a higher share of women's income. Of course, it is not a panacea. All of us, men and women, will remain vulnerable without mechanisms to protect and enhance our agency, our voice. But a basic income system is a powerful force for gender equality. Its time is coming.

Guy Standing is a Professorial Research Associate at SOAS University of London and a founding member and honorary co-president of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), a non-governmental organisation that promotes a basic income for all.

He is a former Programme Director at the International Labour Organization. Standing has written widely in the areas of labour economics, labour market flexibility, structural adjustment policies and social protection. His recent work has concerned the emerging [precariat](#) class and the need to move towards [unconditional basic income](#). His latest books include: [Battling Eight Giants: Basic Income Now](#) (Bloomsbury, 2020); [Plunder of the Commons: A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth](#) (Penguin, 2019); and [Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen](#) (Penguin, 2017).

The author is responsible for the facts contained in the article and the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.