

[Title Slide]

Good afternoon. I am delighted to be here for another wonderful basic income conference in Seoul, and to be able to speak at this historic women's university. I'd like to extend my gratitude for all the visible and invisible labor involved in its organization, and in particular for the very patient and helpful support staff in the blue shirts who, as they usually are, are mostly women.

I was asked to speak on the relation between basic income and the "crisis of care." It's difficult to know how, or where, to begin to discuss the "crisis of care," because there are so many *different* crises of care in different parts of the world. But I want to take issue for the moment with the idea that we are now in a particularly *acute* moment of crisis around care. Care has been in crisis since at least the advent of industrial capitalism.

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This is not to say that there were no crises of care prior to industrial capitalism, but to highlight a form of crisis particular to the capitalist age we still inhabit: the disjunction between the *accumulative, exploitative, and alienating* ethos of unconstrained capitalism and the *unprofitable, reciprocal, and relational* ethos of care. Care is typically recognized as a crisis when care services become unavailable—or at least not available at the preferred, low- or no-cost basis patriarchal capitalism leads us to expect.

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Here is an example of a crisis of care from the U.S. Senator responsible for the defeat of the *Family Assistance Plan*, a proposed Guaranteed Minimum Income plan, in 1971. We couldn't have a Guaranteed Income because Senator Long couldn't find any women to iron his shirts.

We can see other crises now in shortages of care workers in many countries, in the global trade in care that diverts caregivers from the global south to the global north, and in the plummeting fertility rates in almost all advanced capitalist economies.

[Slide 4] The only country in the OECD with fertility above the replacement rate of 2.1 children/woman is Israel. The outlier at the bottom is—does anyone know?—South Korea.

But that low market price for care in the capitalist context has *always* been a crisis for caregivers and care recipients. This manifests in the *pervasive* and *persistent* economic, political, and social inequality of those responsible for care, who are primarily **women**. [Slide 5] This is the European Institute for Gender Equality's Index, showing how far even Europe is from gender equality, which would be represented by a score of 100.

The crises of care are the result of the *market fundamentalism* of contemporary capitalism, which crowds out social relations that are not *profitable* to workers and owners of capital. A basic income on its own can't remedy all the problems of contemporary capitalism. But at its foundation basic income recognizes and enables *unprofitable* forms of human relations, and at its best guarantees all members of society—even the unprofitable ones—the means necessary for a decent, or even a good life.

As a result, the principles embodied in the idea of a basic income are useful tools for analyzing the ways our societies currently support—or fail to support—the inescapable precarity and mutual dependence of human existence. Because the work of care in patriarchal capitalism is organized and reinforced by the inequality of the genders, the question I want to address today is **how the idea of a basic income can help move us toward a more gender-egalitarian society**.

I take my prompt from the theme of this conference—**Basic Income in Reality**—to imagine a shift to a feasible, rather than utopian, form of gender equality. And I take inspiration from Hyosang Ahn's image in his welcoming remarks that basic income is “no longer an enemy at the gate, but a horse in the castle” in many countries. To put it another way, basic income has established itself as a popular *meme* in many countries, firmly in the public consciousness if not yet as firmly on the political agenda. Here are a couple of memes about basic income from both sides of the political spectrum in the U.S. [Slide 6 BI Memes]

I want to consider how we can use this awareness to move forward the fundamental principle of a basic income—that everyone, regardless of gender or care needs or responsibilities, should have the means necessary for a decent, or even a good life—in institutions and social policies in our home countries *as they currently exist*.

[Slide 7] I see the *three key features of a basic income*—**unconditionality**, **universality**, and **individuality**—as analytical tools that can be applied to existing social policy programs to advance us toward that principle. I see this approach in both pragmatic and idealistic terms. In all countries basic income will have to coexist with or adapt existing income support programs. My goal is both to advance incrementally toward a basic income by reforming existing income support programs in its image, and to prepare the necessary institutional framework for the eventual adoption of a basic income.

[Slide 8] Providing economic security for all is, in many countries, the unfinished business of the long 20th century. The development of social policy states in the world’s advanced economies was an acknowledgment of the truth about *all* our capitalist economies: **that economic security can only result from a combination of earned income and income support organized collectively**. The gendered development of these social policy states reflects an *additional, under-acknowledged* truth about our economies: that “productive” work in *paid* employment depends on a foundation of *unpaid* reproductive care work.

The context in which much of this social policy development took place embedded a gender bias in favor of typically male life and employment patterns, traditional family structures, and a gendered division of labor between a “productive breadwinner” and a “non-productive, dependent” caregiver. This is because of the particular relationship of women’s labor to economic development.

Prior to industrial development, women, men, and children worked side by side in agricultural and informal labor markets. As economic activity shifts to cities and factories, home and work separate, requiring a caregiving presence in the household and leading to a gendered division of

labor. The women who do go out to work are likely to be daughters, leaving mothers at home alone with what used to be a shared responsibility.

[Slide 9] This creates what economist Claudia Goldin has identified as a U-shaped pattern in the paid labor participation of married women in particular, here using middle age as a proxy for marital and maternal status. As the economy and social state develop, indicated by increasing GDP along the X axis, opportunities for women's employment increase.

Importantly, the stage of industrial development, when women's paid labor participation is at its lowest at the bottom of the U, coincides with the development of the social policy state. This leads to the development of the *dependency* model for social benefits, with benefits for caregivers *contingent on their relationship to breadwinners*.

Today a majority of women, mothers included, work in paid employment in most advanced economies, but women still bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care, leading to lower hours in paid employment, less continuous employment, and a persistent wage gap despite women's higher educational attainment in comparison to men in many countries. In many countries, the social policy state has not evolved with these changes, and rather than *mitigating* the disadvantages those with responsibility for unpaid care face in the market economy, it *compounds* them.

Basic income's three key features point the way to changes that could be made in existing income support programs that would better support our collective care responsibilities *prior* to the implementation of a basic income, and at the same time prepare institutionally for its implementation when political circumstances are ripe. I want to share the approach I take to these tasks in my research on the possibility of a basic income in the U.S. I acknowledge that the U.S. is behind many countries in social policy development. [Slide 10] As Sociologist Jessica Calarco noted during the covid pandemic, presumably with the comparison to Europe in mind, "Other Countries Have Social Safety Nets. The U.S. Has Women."

But I hope the approach I take is applicable to other countries where many gender inequalities remain *in spite of* a more highly developed social policy state.

For women in the U.S. the most *transformative* of basic income's three key features for *existing* income support programs is its **individuality**. The marital or household-basis of our income support programs works to the detriment of women's economic security. I want to mention four examples here:

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- Social assistance programs—those targeted to the poor through means-testing and high withdrawal rates—are based on *household* income levels, which means that they are quickly lost when two incomes, however low on the income ladder, are combined. This *marriage penalty* traps poor single parents, who bear a dual responsibility for unpaid care work and earned income, in poverty and isolation, preventing them from sharing these responsibilities with another adult. Shifting social assistance benefits to an *individual, additive* basis—ie, in the direction of a *per person* basic income—would remove this disincentive even if social assistance benefits remained, for the time being, *means-tested*.
- The U.S. tax system, on the other hand, provides a *marriage bonus* for middle and upper income taxpayers, especially those with a *traditionally gendered division of labor* between an employed “breadwinner” and a non-working caregiver. It does this through joint tax assessment of married couples, with a preferential tax schedule for *married couples* compared to *single taxpayers* and *single-parent families*. This *marriage bonus* compounds the economic inequality between our most economically vulnerable and most privileged families and reduces the tax revenue available for spending on public provision of care services. Shifting taxation to an *individual* basis would equalize the tax burdens of *earners* with the same income, *reducing* rather than *compounding* the inequalities created by the market.
- Joint taxation of marriage couples also creates a *secondary earner paid labor disincentive* that primarily affects women, but applies to the lower-earning spouse of any gender. In progressive tax systems, *joint taxation* splits the income tax burden evenly between

spouses, effectively *lowering* progressive tax rates on the primary earner and *raising* them on the secondary earner. This creates an economic incentive to *minimize* the paid labor of the *secondary earner* and *maximize* the paid labor of the *primary earner*, reinforcing uneven divisions of labor between paid work and unpaid care, and leading to *lifelong* inequalities of income and wealth that are *compounded* by the U.S. pension systems. Empirical research confirms that shifting taxation and tax-system benefits provision to an *individual* basis promotes a more gender-egalitarian split between paid labor and at least hours *available* for unpaid care work, increasing women's hours in paid labor by as much as 30% in some countries, and achieving smaller, but significant, reductions in men's hours.¹

- Finally, the last U.S. presidential administration's tax legislation eliminated *individual* and *additive* tax exemptions for each household member in favor of a standard exemption that varies only by tax filing status, with the largest exemption for *married couples* regardless of whether they have children or not. The current presidential administration tried to restore a more generous refundable exemption for children than the small tax credit which remained, but was unable to extend it beyond one year as part of the response to the covid pandemic. *Individual* exemptions for children are a critical support of the expenses of childrearing as well as a critical part of the infrastructure for a truly *universal* basic income in countries like the U.S. without an existing child allowance.

In these and many other cases, *gender-neutral* income support programs ostensibly designed to promote the economic security of U.S. citizens instead compound and reinforce the inequalities created by the gendered distribution of unpaid care and paid labor. In these cases, the principles of an *unconditional*, *universal*, and particularly an *individual* basic income point the way to modifications that would be more supportive of caregivers and allow workers of any gender to take on care responsibilities without facing economic insecurity.

¹ Alexander Bick and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, "Quantifying the Disincentive Effects of Joint Taxation on Married Women's Labor Supply," *American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings* 2017, 107:5, 100-04.

These income support examples may be particular to the U.S., but every country in the world has persistent inequalities of gender in economic, political, and social power. The European Union's 2023 report on gender equality finds continuing gender gaps in employment, pay, pensions, and unpaid care despite member countries' higher social spending than the U.S.² The World Economic Forum calculates a gender parity gap in Europe of 24%, and projects that closing the gap will take 67 years.³ On its Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex, the U.S. outperforms all but four European countries, the usual suspects—Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland—representing a tiny proportion of Europe's population. Income support programs and other social policies even in countries with more generous and extensive social policy states fail to remedy market-based gender inequalities and continue to reinforce gendered divisions of labor.

Examining the idea of a basic income from a feminist perspective, and turning that perspective to the structure of ostensibly gender-neutral income support programs are only the first steps. They provide insight into how gender inequality and crises of care persist more than 100 years after women began to demand political equality and more than 50 years after we began to demand economic equality. The next step is to uncover the political obstacles to bringing about gender-inclusive income support programs. My hope is that all of us here today, committed to the implementation of a basic income in our respective countries, will find ways to move existing income support programs in the direction of a gender-inclusive basic income and thus prepare the ground for its eventual arrival.

[Slide 12 Cat meme]

I will leave you on a hopeful note, in the spirit of Kim Jong Cheol, with one more meme.

Thank you.

² [European Commission. 2023 Report on Gender Equality in the EU. chap. 2.](#)

³ [World Economic Forum. Global Gender Gap Report 2023.](#)