

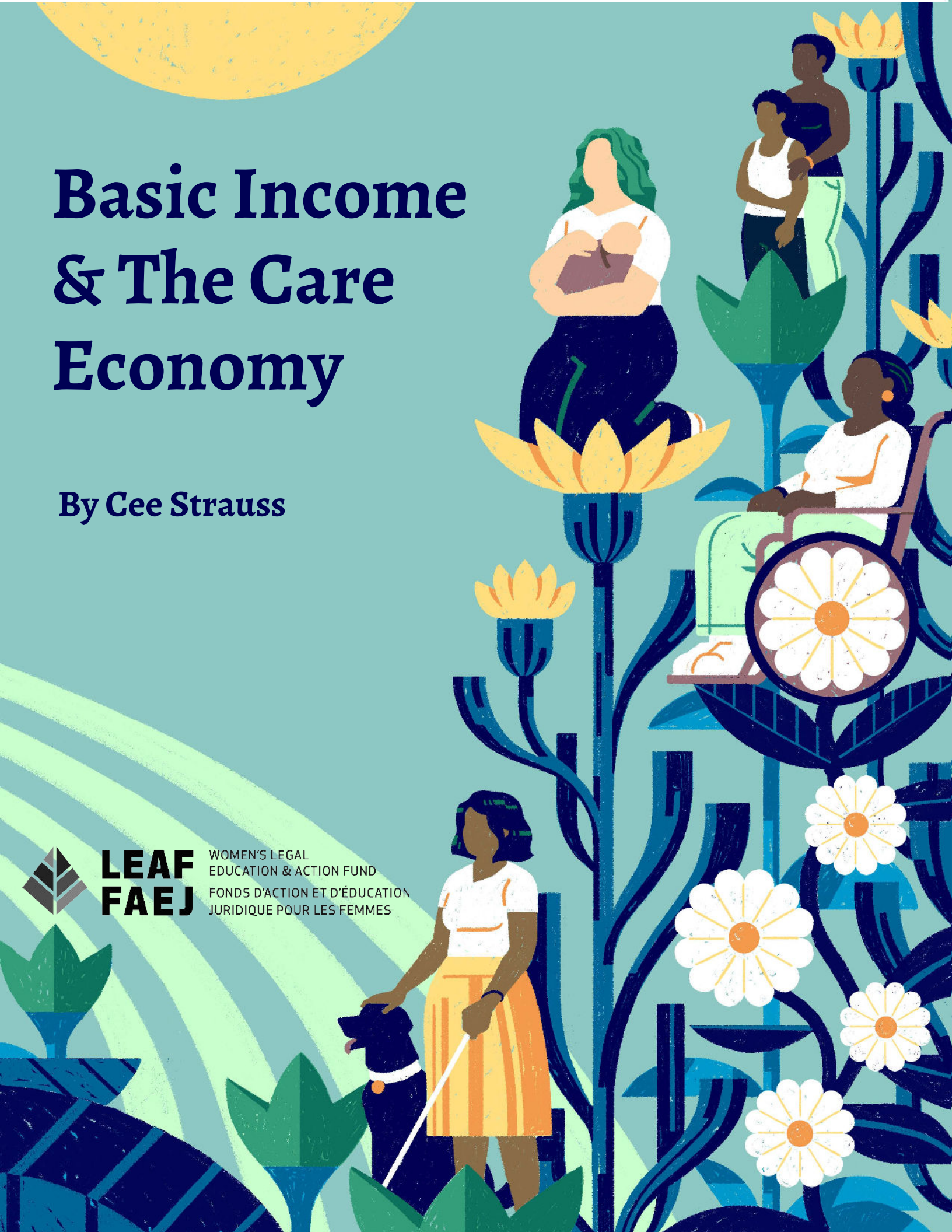
Basic Income & The Care Economy

By Cee Strauss



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WOMEN'S LEGAL
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LEAF is a national, charitable, non-profit organization, founded in 1985. LEAF works to advance the substantive equality rights of women and girls in Canada through litigation, law reform and public education using the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

This publication was created as part of LEAF’s Basic Income Project. The Basic Income Project aims to assess the potential of a basic income to address longstanding issues of gender and racial socioeconomic inequality. The Project also supports and informs LEAF’s law reform efforts and potential upcoming interventions concerning women and gender diverse people’s economic and social rights.

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought long-existing inequalities into sharp relief. Among other things, it highlighted the fact that significant reforms to Canada's social protection systems are required. With respect to gender equality, the pandemic demonstrated that the care economy—those aspects of the care sector that have historically been understood to be “women’s work”, such as health care, childcare, education, and cleaning services—requires significant investment and transformative change. This report seeks to determine whether a basic income program should be included in a feminist advocacy strategy for change in the care economy. It is a companion report to *Basic Income, Gender & Disability*, and is designed to contribute to the Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund’s larger Basic Income Project.

In this report, we conclude that a basic income program should be included in a feminist advocacy strategy for change in the care economy. As an income transfer sufficient to meet people’s basic needs, a livable basic income is one of the ways in which Canada can respect its international human rights obligation to provide a social protection floor. This benefit should not come at the expense of other necessary components of a strong welfare state, including accessible, quality public services and programs for all.

In the context of the care economy, a basic income could provide compensation for unpaid caregiving labour. Unpaid acts of care labour fall disproportionately on low-income women and gender-diverse people—and single parents and Black, Indigenous, and racialized, disabled, and migrant women and gender-diverse people in particular—reducing their capacity to participate in the waged labour market to the extent that they otherwise would. This directly impacts the level of income they make, contributing to the feminization and racialization of poverty. Set at an adequate level, a basic income could supplement or replace employment income when low-income women and gender-diverse people are caring for their families, their communities, and themselves. This would contribute to their income security

and income stability, and would go some way to addressing the inequitable distribution of care labour.

A central concern that some feminists have had about basic income is its potential to encourage women to leave the labour market. If women and gender-diverse people have caregiving responsibilities and can receive an income untied to paid employment, they may choose to (or feel compelled to) stop or reduce their paid work in order to attend to their caregiving responsibilities. One of the promises of a basic income is autonomy: the freedom to choose how to spend one's money and time. This includes, of course, the freedom to use a basic income to do care work for one's close people. However, it is imperative that a basic income not increase the costs of paid work to such an extent that women and gender-diverse people are compelled to leave the labour market, to their own financial, social, and psychological detriment.

For this reason, a basic income program must be accompanied by three other components of care economy infrastructure: (1) high-quality, affordable, accessible public care services; (2) valuing paid caregiving work and other gendered occupations; and (3) a shift in workplace norms to allow for flexibility and part-time work arrangements without significant financial penalty. Without these elements in place, LEAF does not support implementation of a basic income, as it would risk entrenching gendered economic and social inequality. Flowing from these requirements, we make a number of further recommendations, discussed throughout the report and listed in full at its end.

Finally, this report explores the question of whether a basic income might provide a means to prevent gender-based violence or to assist those exiting abusive environments. The research on the former question is mixed. As for assisting those exiting abusive environments, we conclude that a basic income could assist survivors of gender-based violence by providing them with a steady stream of income.

Recommendations for federal, provincial, and territorial governments

1. The federal government should work with provinces and territories to implement a basic income program for all working-age adults who do not qualify for a Canada Disability Benefit. LEAF only supports a basic income that has the below characteristics:

- an income-tested cash transfer that is permanent (i.e., not a pilot);
- delivered to individuals;
- adequate to meet basic needs (i.e., livable);
- replaces social assistance, but only once a basic income has brought recipients to an adequate income level;
- does not replace any other social supports that currently accompany social assistance;
- accessible to all individuals regardless of immigration status;
- portable across provinces and territories;
- reduces or eliminates the surveillance that is present in social assistance and disability benefits;
- sets allowable earnings exemptions at a generous level, with minimal clawbacks of earned income above maximum allowable earnings;
- not conditional on demonstrating work history, the fact that one is pursuing work, or participation in employment programs;
- not paid for by low-income people;
- indexed to the cost of living.

2. The federal government should work with provinces and territories to implement a targeted basic income for people with disabilities (a Canada Disability Benefit). LEAF only supports a disability benefit that has the below characteristics:

- includes all of the elements of a basic income discussed above, except for those that necessarily do not apply;
- provided to all disabled people who meet the *Accessible Canada Act* definition of disability;
- ensures that the cost of both specific and general extraordinary disability-related supports and services are covered, or is generous enough to enable disabled people to purchase these on their own.
- *for an explanation of these elements, see LEAF's companion report on **Basic Income, Gender & Disability**.*

3. A basic income should not be implemented without further consultation with Indigenous communities.
 - members of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities must be full participants in the design of programs and services.
 - First Nations, Métis, and Inuit leaders and governments must be consulted regarding the development of a basic income program.
4. Recognize the authority of Indigenous governments, such as First Nations communities and Inuit regional governments, to create and implement their own models of income security that may or may not include a federally-funded basic income.
5. The design, implementation, and evaluation of a basic income program must be led by the most marginalized.
 - basic income program and disability benefit program design, implementation, and evaluation must be led by women (both cis and trans), Two-Spirit, transgender, and non-binary people who are disabled, Black, First Nations (both on- and off-reserve), Métis, Inuit, otherwise racialized, on social assistance, precariously housed, lone parents, and/or have precarious immigration status (and/or by advocates for those women and gender-diverse people who have precarious immigration status, such as migrant justice advocates).
6. In order to advance gender equality, any basic income program **must** be accompanied by the following policies and commitments at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels:
 - clear and fast pathways to permanent residence that allow for better working conditions and labour market outcomes for people with no or precarious immigration status;
 - stable, high quality jobs (including part-time jobs) with appropriate training, living wages, and benefits for people with diverse needs—in particular in the care economy;
 - strong labour protections in the care sector and other gendered occupations, including unionization protection, paid sick days, access to family leave, proactive pay equity, and pay transparency;
 - work with employers, workers, and unions to create a shift in workplace culture and norms to allow for flexibility and part-time work arrangements without significant financial penalty, such as a move to a four-day work week (and comparable reduction in hours for shift work);
 - labour re-entry programs for caregivers;

- high-quality, affordable, and accessible public programs across the country, including: childcare; a national housing strategy; fully-subsidized, appropriate, individualized home support services; and a national Pharmacare program, modelled after the one currently available in B.C.;
 - expanded eligibility for all public programs including healthcare to include migrant workers and others with precarious immigration status;
 - elimination of clawbacks of Canada Pension Plan-Disability benefits [*see LEAF's companion report on **Basic Income, Gender & Disability***];
 - a fully refundable Disability Tax Credit [*see LEAF's companion report on **Basic Income, Gender & Disability***].
7. Any basic income program **should** be accompanied by the following policies and commitments at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels:
- permanent residence on arrival to support better labour market outcomes;
 - equitable funding for child welfare services on reserve;
 - decarceration policies, in particular for Black and Indigenous women;
 - lump sums available to people exiting abusive relationships;
 - expanded EI coverage for part-time workers and migrant workers;
 - a fully-funded, intersectional National Action Plan to end gender-based violence, and a National Action Plan to end gender-based violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ that responds to the Calls for Justice flowing from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls;
 - other public policy to address effects of discrimination including racism, misogyny, ableism, and colonialism.