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Placing gender justice at the heart of the wellbeing economy

The neoliberal model takes GDP growth as the key indicator for societal prosperity. Against this narrow measure, several more equitable and more sustainable alternatives have been suggested. But why place gender justice at the heart of a new paradigm for human and planetary wellbeing, ask Naila Kabeer and Ania Plomien?

We are living through a time of profound contradiction. On the one hand, we are standing at the “**peak of possibilities**”, given unprecedented levels of technological progress and wealth. But we are also on the brink of global meltdown, given the overlapping social – economic, political, cultural and ecological – crises we currently face. The potentialities to realise prosperity and justice are denied by the simultaneous rise of severe poverty and extraordinary wealth, amounting to a **crisis of extreme inequality**. Although economic growth, expressed in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), has come to **dominate policy the world over** on the promise of prosperity, it is marked by a spectacular failure to deliver a fair distribution of wealth, to **operate safely** within the limits of **our finite planet** and to redress the gendered harms stemming from **patriarchal structures** that cast many people and activities **invisible and of no value** by placing them outside the production boundary.

While there may be multiple causes of the acceleration of these devastating trends, we argue that the major underlying factor is the current GDP-based growth paradigm itself – a paradigm which renders alternative approaches to social progress irrelevant. We have seen a major shift from the earlier state-managed model of growth, which accommodated a role for public intervention to keep injustice in check, to a neoliberal growth model based on deregulated markets where the pursuit of private profit takes precedence over human and planetary wellbeing. The result has been intensified inequalities in the achievement of even the most basic provisions and capabilities needed to survive and prosper – care, education, food, health, shelter and water.

However, the hegemony of neoliberal ideas has not gone unchallenged. It has given rise to a **growing movement** that is demanding a transition away from the current paradigm to an alternative

based on the wellbeing of people and planet. We see our *Gender Justice and the Wellbeing Economy* **research programme** as part of this movement, sharing its critique of the growth paradigm. What distinguishes ours from other programmes for **more equitable** or **more sustainable** alternatives is that we place gender justice at the heart of our work.

Four major shortcomings with GDP growth as a basic model for prosperity

GDP, the key indicator of current definitions of growth and prosperity, constitutes the starting point for our agenda: what it counts and what it excludes, and hence what it values and what it renders invisible. GDP is made up of all the goods and services that are exchanged in the marketplace and have some market value – or at the very least, can be imputed to have a market value. Growth then refers to the increasing volume of those goods and services, and a country is believed to be progressing when its economy succeeds in growing. What is important for our argument is *what is left out* and the **implications** of these omissions for social justice.



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For one, GDP ignores distributional issues – it contains no judgements about who benefits from growth. This is not the same as neutrality or fairness. Given that market mechanisms favour those who are in a position to take advantage of market opportunities (whether such advantage is achieved or inherited), markets inevitably reproduce and exacerbate prior inequalities. Regulation and redistribution could keep these mechanisms in check, but in an era of deregulated markets and shrinking taxation that limits the possibilities for redistribution, we are short of checks and balances. The **result** is the obscene concentration of wealth that we see today, summed up in the **statistic** that the 10 richest men in the world own more than the bottom 3.1 billion people combined.

A second glaring omission of the GDP growth paradigm is its indifference to normative issues. GDP makes no distinction between market activities that contribute to, versus those which detract from, the wellbeing of individuals or wider society. A good example is the production and sale of harmful

drugs like opiates, which has led to a crisis deemed **the worst public health disaster** in the USA and Canada. Juxtapose this with the production and sale of life-saving drugs, like **Covid-19 vaccines**. Both are valued based only on the price they fetch in the marketplace; in neither case is any moral value considered, or any judgement made, as to the welfare consequences of the drugs in question.

Third, GDP is not concerned with preserving the natural environment. The drive for growth in an era of unregulated markets has allowed the world's most powerful actors to exploit the world's resources to a degree of considerable depletion or irreversible extinction. Cutting down trees in order to sell the timber is regarded as a positive contribution to GDP, even if the result is the decimation of forest land and the destruction of natural habitats (it is **estimated**, for example, that the Amazon loses around 10,000 acres of rainforest every day).

Finally, GDP neglects the unpaid care and reproductive work that is necessary to support and sustain human life, labour and wellbeing on a daily and intergenerational basis. Largely undertaken by women and girls, this work is essential not only to the production of biological and social life, it is also the foundation of *all* economic activity, a point championed by feminist economists **Margaret Reid** as early as 1934 and **Marilyn Waring** in 1988, and many since. Yet in a market economy, the value of unpaid care and reproductive work remains unaccounted for, placing those who perform it at all kinds of disadvantages vis-à-vis forms of work that *are* given market value.



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What's more, the inequality in the gender division of unpaid domestic work – and the ideologies that justify it – is foundational to the systemic nature of the gender injustices permeating the world today much more generally: injustices in the distribution of roles, responsibilities, resources and power, both within the domestic domain and beyond it. In turn, these injustices are intensified when gender inequalities intersect with inequalities of economic position and social identity and go on to determine the impact of climate change, with women and girls from marginalized groups rendered particularly vulnerable.

Why gender justice is central to problems of illbeing – as well as to potential solutions

It is this final omission that motivates our programme as we spell out in detail how gender injustice is bound up with economic and climate injustice. There is now considerable research on the causes and consequences of economic inequality, of climate change, and of the interlinkages between them. But gender injustice is only intermittently addressed in this research even though it is closely bound up with these phenomena. It needs to be seen as a central part of the problem – and as central to any viable solutions.

Our **programme** has two overarching objectives. The first is to carry out research and advocacy to demonstrate how gender intensifies the inequalities in income, wealth and basic resources necessary to wellbeing that are generated by unregulated market forces – and to explore how these gender inequalities are both mediating the impact of climate change and curtailing our capacity to respond to it. The second is to place the idea of a caring economy, one that prioritizes the care of people and planet, at the centre of the wellbeing agenda and to bring together the pathways through which we might achieve it. Crises, emergencies and insecurities of various kinds have always been a part of the human condition. But so have been the abilities, energies and ideas that generate knowledge, technology and social development capable of addressing them. Establishing pathways to gender justice and the wellbeing economy has never been more urgent and yet, arguably, it has also never been more achievable.

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