

## **Gender Equality Must Become A Lived Reality: Gender Budgeting, Our First Step towards It**

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*Overview of a gender audit, to locate women in the national budget as well as in the economy. Mainstreaming gender in budget allocation process and empowerment of women through gender sensitive budgeting.*

The term gender budgeting has become a catch phrase to describe various government initiatives that seek to address gender issues in the domain of public expenditure and policy. In India, the strategic framework for gender sensitivity in resource allocation has been earmarking a specific minimum quantum of funds/benefits for women in all women related sectors like health, education, microcredit, employment and training. In India, women who comprise half of the nation's population are the worst hit in terms human development indicators. Women lag behind men in many social indicators like health, education, and economic opportunities. Hence they need special attention due to their vulnerability and lack of access to resources. In such a situation the national government will need to prioritize the needs of women in order to work towards gender equality. For example, in the health sector, males and females have same needs in terms of general health. But women have greater needs than men in terms of reproductive health and maternal health issues. Women's health needs are often viewed to be restricted only to reproduction.

For the larger benefit of our economy, our budgets should be made gender-sensitive because it will facilitate superior utilization of government expenditure towards women-related activities and keep a tab on unbalanced consequences of former economic policies. However, up until the year 2004, the process of gender budgeting was more reactive than proactive. The scenario largely changed after 2004 due to constant lobbying by the economists and women's groups which compelled the Ministry of Finance to authorize all the ministries to establish a Gender Budgeting Cell. Specific focus on gender based resource allocation is seen from the Eighth Plan (1992-97) onwards.

The Eighth Plan for the first time highlighted a gender perspective and the need to ensure definite flow of funds from the general development sectors to women. The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) adopted Women Component Plan and directed both the centre and the state to ensure that not less than 30 per cent of funds are earmarked in all women related sectors. The Tenth Plan reinforced commitment to gender budgeting to establish its

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gender-differential impact and to translate gender commitments into budgetary allotments.

Though women have begun to figure in the annual financial statements of the government, we find an overall low priority given to women's issues from the minuscule allocations made on Women's Schemes, as is with the implementation of the PWDVA Act. According to the budget estimate for 2012-13, the total allocation of the Ministry of Women and Child is INR 18500 crore of which the allocation on women's welfare is only INR 858.68 crore. Women make up 48.5% of India's population yet the Gender Budget Estimate for 2013-14 is only INR 97,134 crore. This is a mere 5.8% of the total Union Budget expenditure (BE). The allocation of INR 20,440 crore to the Ministry of Women and Child Development is a marginal increase of INR 200 crore from the previous year's budget and falls well below the annual outlay of INR 23,541 crore outlined within 12th Five Year Plan. Of this, INR 17,664.02 crore has been allocated to the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme leaving very little funding for women friendly initiatives and schemes (CBGA, 2013).

In the current budget of 2014-15, the government has announced the establishment of Crisis Management Centre for women in all government and private hospitals of Delhi, which will utilize the Nirbhaya Fund. The Nirbhaya Fund is a 1000 crore corpus which was announced in the 2013 Union Budget. According to former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, during whose tenure this fund was set up, it is expected to support initiatives by the government and NGOs working towards protecting the dignity and ensuring safety of women in India. In November 2013, Ministry of Urban Development had asked the states to propose and implement new plans that can be financed through Nirbhaya Fund. A landmark achievement was the special outlay of 100 crore to the needs of the girl child, under the name of 'Beti Bachao, Beti Pado' scheme by our current Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley. The scheme, will help in generating awareness and improve the efficiency of delivery of welfare services meant for women. The NDA government has also proposed pilot testing a scheme under the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways in the budget. Rs 50 crore has been set aside for this pilot project, which will look into safety issues of women in public transport.

However, there are still long overdue demand from various women's groups and economists with respect to budgetary allocations. This includes effective implementation of Pre Conception and Pre Natal Diagnostics Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, implementation of Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. Improvement of retention rate of girls in schools has been a troubling issue for long which hopefully will get necessary attention in the current plan period. Dedicated training institutes need to be set up which provides women with more skills development in non-conventional areas. One area which has been neglected for long is the demands of sex workers. Protection of interests of women in difficult circumstances such as child prostitutes, homeless women, street girls, abducted girls, child brides, women suffering

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from HIV/AIDS, single women and elderly women is in urgent need of budgetary commitment.

Apart from implementing and working on the much-needed areas as mentioned above, the government should also work with all the departments both at the Central and State levels because it has been often seen that resource allocations as made under gender budget do not reach in time or are mostly unspent. Government should focus on effective monitoring of the allocated funds with superior transparency and accountability at all levels.