

Gender Concerns in the Union Budget 2016-17

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The Union Budget has failed to allocate substantiate funds. With less gender mainstreaming and with lack of assurance of safety to women the budget fails to make an impact in this regard.

The Railway Budget and the Union Budget for financial year 2016-17 were presented on 25-2-2016 and 29-2-2016 respectively. The Union Budget 2016-17 has allocated Rs. 90,625 crores for gender concerns in different ministries. But it does not show any increase in the "Gender budget" i.e. financial allocation that directly benefits women and girls with budget allocation of 4.58% of the total. The revised estimate in the Union Budget for 2015-16 is 4.55 per cent of the total allocations and the financial allocations to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) were slashed from Rs. 21,194 crores to Rs. 10,382 crores. Due to pressure from the MWCD, the revised budget was increased to Rs. 17,352 crores. The current budget has made financial allocation of Rs. 17,408 crores to MWCD.

The Union Budget allocates Rs. 2000 crores to provide the BPL families with a cooking gas connection at a subsidised rate so that poor women will not have to use Chulha for cooking resulting into inhalation of carbon monoxide, major cause of their respiratory tract infections. Gender economists have demanded that the LPG connection must be in the name of women members of poor households. The timeline given by the FM state that during 2016-17, 50 lakh BPL (Below Poverty Line) households. The budget also promises to continue the Scheme for at least two more years to cover a total of Rs.5 crores to BPL households. This scheme may be a boon to 'neo-middle class' but majority of the toiling poor women who cannot afford to buy 'subsidised' cooking gas @ Rs. 6000/- per cylinder.

Women farmers and cultivators are the backbone of agricultural production in India. Majority of agricultural labourers are women. In agricultural sector also the allocation at Rs 20,400 crores is lower as compared to the 2014-15 in which the allocation was Rs 22,309 crores. The current budget makes a non-plan allocation of Rs.15,000 crores to the Ministry of Agriculture to transfer funds to compensate commercial banks for providing subsidised credit to agriculture.

The budget permits 100 per cent FDI in rural markets. This will impact the small and marginal farmers. Entry of corporate sector into agrarian marketing has already made condition of farmers precarious as a result of their monopsonistic control where large number of poor sellers face handful of buyers. Desperate farmers will have to distress sell their products to the multinational corporations.

Several states in our country are facing severe drought resulting into agrarian unemployment. In this context, increase of MGNREGA allocation by 7.7% is highly inadequate.

The Union Budget has provided an outlay of Rs. 500 crores to promote entrepreneurship among SC/ST and women. Each nationalised bank will have to facilitate at least two projects per bank branch, one for SC/ST and one for women entrepreneur. This scheme claims to benefit at least 2.5 lakh SC/ST/ women entrepreneurs. Quarterly social audit is a must for this scheme or else like 'Nirbhaya Fund', this allocation will also remain unspent.

The Railway Budget has promised a 33% sub-quota for women under all reserved categories. Looking at increasing attacks on women commuters, the railways need to allocate more funds for security and safety of women on the railway platforms and in the trains.

The Gender Budget Statement has increased MNEW's allocation to Rs.50 crores which is double as compared to previous year. The budget has not taken serious consideration with respect to violence against women that has escalated many fold. While schemes to combat trafficking and empowering adolescent girls have received increased funds, the schemes meant for implementation of PCPNDT act, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act have not received much allocation. Corpus of Rs. 3000 crores under Nirbhaya Fund has largely remained unutilised. On March 8, 2016, the Union Budget 2015-16 had allocated Rs. 653 crores for Scheme for Safety of Women in Public Road Transport with an objective to ensure safety of women and girl child in public transport by monitoring location of public road transport vehicles to provide immediate assistance in minimum response time to the victims in distress. The proposed scheme under the "Nirbhaya Fund" envisages setting up of a National Emergency Response System with a control room under the overall control of Ministry of Home Affairs, which will receive alerts from distressed women and take action on it. Under the scheme for giving grants to states for setting up driving schools, preference is given to proposals for driving school for women. Similarly, 'Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao' scheme was announced with the goal of improving efficiency in delivery services for women. Proposal submitted by different ministries, local self-government bodies and state governments under these schemes are gathering dust and funds have remained largely unutilized.

Subsidised education and health are most beneficial to women and girls. The Union Budget, 2016-17 provides Rs. 40,000 crores for school education which is slightly higher than last year's allocation of Rs. 39,039 crores and higher education has received Rs 16,500 crores this year as compared to from Rs.15,855 crores. Both are grossly inadequate. This will result into intensification of privatisation and commercialisation of school and higher education.

The same is happening with respect to health sector- withdrawal of the state from public health to promotion of private health sector. Except for 3000 stores for distribution of subsidised medicine, the budget subsidises private insurance companies and pharmaceutical industries in the name of public – private partnership.

Flagship programme such as Integrated Child Development Centre (ICDS), like last year, has faced cuts in allocations. In 2015-16 the budgetary allocation was merely Rs 8000 crores but the actual disbursement of funds was Rs. 15,394 crores. Nutrition of pregnant mothers and children in 0-6 age group will suffer as the Union Budget 2016-17 allocates only Rs.14,000 crores. Even the Mid-Day Meal Programme will also face financial crunch as the allocation is merely Rs. 9,700 crores, while inflationary prices of food items have increased drastically. In spite of increase in workload, the foot soldiers of ICDS and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) don't even get minimum wages; leave aside pension, social security benefits and health insurance.

Instead of direct distribution of food grains and essential items, the budget paves way for cash transfer in PDS through provision of automation facilities for 3 lakh Fair Price Shops, ATMs and mini-ATMs in rural linked to AADHAR. The budget does not promise of price control for essential commodities to ease poor women's woes.

Trend analysis of allocation to social sector in the pre (before 1991) and post (after 1991) Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) phase has revealed that poor women have suffered the most due to drastic budgetary cuts in Public Distribution System and public health, safe public transport & child care facilities, food security, drinking water and sanitation. There is no gender mainstreaming with respect to safety of women in the budgets of Local Self Government Bodies.

The Union Budget promises a lot through digital India scheme but there is no financial allocation for specific programmes and schemes for digital empowerment of girls and women.

The Union Budget, 2016-17 has given priority to formation of 100 smart cities in terms of high allocation for physical infrastructure, IT based and cyber technology based governance. Smart cities have to be Safe cities. Town planners, policy makers and budget experts need to do gender budgeting to ensure women-friendly civic infrastructure- water, sanitation, health care, safe transport, public toilets, help lines, skill development for crisis management and, safety at work place. While making budgets for social defense services, consideration must be given to safety of girls and women in schools and colleges in terms of prevention of child sexual abuse through public education and counseling facilities, separate toilets for girls and boys in schools, legal literacy on POCSO Act, 2012 and Prevention of Sexual Harassment Workplace Act, 2013. Provision must be made to have special cells in the police department to take action against display of pornographic images, SMS messages, cybercrimes that victimize young girls at public places or in public transport- buses, local trains, rickshaws and taxis.

There is a need to integrate safety of women as a major concern in flagship centrally sponsored schemes such as Jawahar Lal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), PMSSY, NUHM are supposed to have 30% of funds as Women's Component.

Several state governments have sent GR regarding allocation of 5% of total revenues for women and children. This should be increased to 10%. Kerala has done this. Moreover, urban local self-government (LSGs) bodies can raise revenues by heavy taxes on Tobacco, alcohol, private vehicles and entertainment industry. Some amount of fine collected for causing damage to environment (introduction of Green Tax), high speed driving, wrong parking and breaking rules can also be used for welfare of women and children. Surcharge, earmarked charge for specific purpose such as Education Cess-2 % of salary, income tax for disaster management has raised revenues for urban LSG. In Maharashtra, transport cess at the time of Bangladesh war in 1971, later on was diverted to EGS kitty.

The Centrally Sponsored Schemes are meant to have national focus on poverty alleviation or welfare. Fund sharing pattern between centre and state has changed from 75:25 from 60:40 and many poor states are not able to contribute their share, as a result most of the anti-poverty programmes and flagship schemes are not fully implemented or are totally non-implemented. By putting the onus on state governments to provide for social sector, the Centre is washing off its hands with respect to needs of SC, ST, women and minorities.

Gender sensitive budget demands re-prioritisation of financial allocations by urban and rural Local Self-Government bodies in favour of:

- Working women's hostels, crèches, cheap eating facilities, public toilets
- Women friendly and SAFE public transport- local trains, Metro, buses
- Subsidised housing for single/ deserted/ divorced/ widowed women
- Nutrition- Strengthening PDS and nutritional mid-day meals
- Health- Abolition of user fees for BPL population, one stop crisis centre in public hospital for women/girls survivors of violence linked with shelter homes
- Skill Training Centres for women and tailor made courses

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- Safe, efficient and cheap public Transport-bus, train, metro
- Safe drinking water in the Community Centres
- Technological upgradation- Occupational health & safety of recycling workers/rag pickers
- Proper electrification in the communities
- Multipurpose Community Centres, half way homes for elderly and mentally disturbed women

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