

# #MeToo: Why are economic policymakers silent?

It's time policymakers view gender justice as a budgetary priority, in order to create a safe work environment for women

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When #MeToo revelations hit the global conscience as a compelling case for strengthening women's economic empowerment, one crucial question that remains unanswered is what exactly the macroeconomic policymakers of our country think about it.

Can macroeconomic policymakers be indifferent to such issues, dismissing them as ones that have to be exclusively dealt by legislative fiat? This conspicuous absence of macro policymakers in the debate may be because of the fact that social movements on women's rights and gender justice are hardly recognised as an economic issue — when it is indeed a “compelling economic issue”.

It encapsulates the unhealthy power relations (it has many layers to analyse, when a man in power asserts sexual favours from his colleagues as his “rights” and when he cruelly transgresses) and associated economic costs.

The harassment affects the productivity of a woman in multiple ways through day-to-day trauma in

her work station. If the fastest and the smartest way to boosting economic growth is through strengthening women's labour force participation, dismissing #MeToo revelations as “non-economic” or “private” would be unwise and can result in adverse macroeconomic consequences.

Macro policymakers, in general, believe that ‘gender issues’ are not their cup of tea. Researchers — both men and women — are divided in their stance about gender in economics. It is a tug of war between the hard-core qualitative world of “compelling story telling” versus rigorous quantitative measurement of gender inequalities.

It has been a struggle for feminist economists to push the frontier of empirical investigation from a marginalised treatment of ‘gender’ in economics, to “gender mainstreaming”.

## Budget biases

To put it upfront, for instance, even budgets are not gender-neutral. To be precise, how national and sub-national budgets of a country address sexual harassment of women at work and violence against women, is a crucial ‘human rights’



**Gender justice** An economic issue

question. How a country effectively translates the gender commitments into budgetary commitments is something which we cannot afford to postpone any further.

That budgets can be a powerful policy tool to tackle gender inequalities was first highlighted in the study on ‘gender diagnosis and budgeting’ by National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP) in 2000.

Prior to that, the media debates on gender issues in budgets were broadly confined to whether Finance Minister(s) had referred to “tax cuts in cosmetics”. Finance

Minister(s) would prefer to focus only on their ‘core’ responsibility of managing ‘deficits’, ‘medium-term fiscal frameworks’, and other ‘macro-fundamentals’.

Given the gender budgeting frameworks within the Ministry of Finance, it is crucial to gauge the Finance Minister's thoughts on #MeToo revelations — from the perspectives of women's economic empowerment.

## Low labour participation

Given the abysmally low levels of women's labour force participation in India, it will be unfortunate if macro policymakers consider that #MeToo revelations have nothing to do with the planning and budgeting policies to ensure women's economic empowerment through judicious public policies. #MeToo cases are the result of an accumulated neglect of women's economic empowerment along with the failure of “rule of law”.

How much a country spends on women's economic empowerment is a compelling question, more than ever before.

The NIPFP has shown that the estimates of specifically targeted public spending for women's eco-

nomic empowerment by the government has been only less than one per cent of the entire Union Budget.

The NIPFP researchers also flagged that this one per cent came from as high as around 40 specifically targeted programmes designed in various sectors — in the Demand for Grants — for women. The ‘too many programmes with too little money’ problem demands both an urgent convergence of public spending in tackling gender inequalities and significant budgetary provisions.

Since over 94 per cent of working women are in the unorganised sector, ensuring macro policies to safeguard the safety and security of women in this sector is crucial for their economic empowerment.

What India needs are “ex-ante” policies to address the high rates of sexual harassment faced by women at work in formal and informal sectors, in low-wage and high-wage sectors; and obviously not the “ad hoc” and “ex-post” interventions.

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