

Looking through a 'gender lens'

The announcements for women in a budget are just the tip of the iceberg. An intelligent woman can ask: how much of these announcements are backed by real budgetary allocations? Usually, an independent Fiscal Council tries to be a watchdog to track these allocations in many countries, and seek the truth about whether the budgetary promises are just "token provisions". India has no Fiscal Council yet. If not a Fiscal Council, what else can be the second best macro policy tool for a citizen to understand how much our country spends on women? The answer is Gender Budgeting Statements.

Gender budgeting in India has been a silent revolution. It is interesting to recall that the analytical matrices for preparing these statements were first prepared by the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP). There was a time when the discussions on what there is for women in the budget were largely confined to trivial discussions on "how much tax reduction is there for cosmetics?". India has come a long way from such debates, with the advent of serious research of gender issues in macro-fiscal policies. No "new" budgetary announcements for women were made in the 2019 interim budget. Even so, the existing Ujjwala scheme, worth Rs 3,200 crore in 2018-19, integrating gender budgeting in the energy sector by providing clean fuel to women in poor households, is a firm example of how fiscal policy can ensure gender equality outcomes. This is a powerful policy tool in the backdrop of the fact that indoor air pollution was causing more deaths among women and children than malaria.

Preparing gender budgeting simultaneously with social and physical infrastructure is a welcome move. A quick analysis of Expenditure Budgets, uploaded on the ministry of finance website immediately after today's interim-budget speech, revealed that the budgetary allocation on "specifically targeted" programmes for women has declined from ₹4,271.09 crore (budget estimates/BE) to ₹2,573.66 crore (revised estimates/RE) in 2018-19. Fiscal marksmanship refers to this huge deviation between BE and RE, which translates into the reality that higher budgetary allocation per se does not guarantee higher spending on women. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana (PMMV) Yojana (previously known as Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana) is a conditional cash transfer



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to pregnant and lactating women. Gender budgeting to support safe delivery and good breast feeding practices by ensuring partial compensation for wage loss during child-birth, and to provide good nutrition for the child's initial months, is conceptually welcome. However, the analysis of demand for grants of PMMV Yojana, revealed that the amount has declined from ₹2,400 crore (BE) to ₹1,200 crore (RE) in 2018-19.

In addition to "specifically targeted" programmes for women, a quick look into the estimates which show the intensity of gender allocations in mainstream public spending in India revealed that India spent around 5% of the total budgetary allocation on women at ₹12,4366.83 crore in FY 2018-19. These estimates do not contain "hard to price" categories of unpaid "care economy" in India.

More than 70% of beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Mudra programme, which offers financial support to small and micro enterprises, were women. This is a welcome trend. India should design more fiscal policies for women's economic empowerment, replacing the policies which reinforce the stereotype of gender roles. Access to formal credit is very crucial here, as poor women have been treated as "non-bankable clients" as they do not have collaterals.

The cost of credit — low interest rates or differential interest rates for women — is also equally important to mainstream women in the economy, away from the bad Ponzi schemes in the village. The Jan Dhan scheme is expected to create positive outcomes in this regard.

The tax rebate announcements in this budget are indeed gender-neutral. However, as just around 4% of women work in the organised sector, the direct tax announcements do not touch more than 90% of Indian women. The single-most significant announcement in the budget was direct income support for marginal farmers. However, it is fiscally difficult. The gender-disaggregated outcomes of such announcement depend on whether this policy is framed on the basis of "autonomous" individuals or households. The announcements relate to "blue economy" — especially fisheries — can benefit women due to their significant participation in the sector. To conclude, unless we revive the Gender Budgeting Secretariat the ministry of finance created in 2004-05, co-opting macro-fiscal experts, gender budgeting, as a policy tool, cannot be explored fully.