

Towards Gender Equality?

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Surprisingly, even though the government had been presented with the recommendations of gender economists and the Feminist Policy Collective for moving towards Transformative Financing for Women and Girls, the Union Budget appears clueless on the matter.

The Union budget of India (2023-24) marked by 'Growth, Green, Digital' has been seriously debated after its presentation in the Parliament on February 1, 2023. The mainstream media has applauded 'fiscal prudence', massive investment infrastructure, cutting of fiscal subsidies, policy of disinvestment from public sector enterprises and tax cuts for 'hard working' middle class.

It is important to scrutinise the budgetary allocations from the gender lens when Indian Presidency for G20 proclaimed gender inclusive development. The current budget has focussed on CAPEX, an increase in capital expenditure by 33 per cent to Rs 10 lakh crore i.e. 3.3 per cent of the GDP to promote technology, infrastructure and private manufacturing sector. But growth per se doesn't translate to welfare or empowerment. In the previous year as well as in the current financial year, the only focus of the Union Budget is supply-side economics and growth aided by *Saptarishi*- Inclusive Development, Digitalisation, Infrastructure Investment, Unleashing Potential through skilling, Green Growth, Youth Power, Financial Sector.

The Union Budget has ignored the social sector. Women's empowerment does not just mean an increase in budgets related to the women-centric programmes; rather, it is about mainstreaming gender across budgets of all ministries and departments. Both in real and nominal terms, the social sector has taken the backseat in this budget. Only 8 per cent of Gross Domestic Product is allocated to social sector that includes education (2.9 per cent), health (1 per cent); food security (1 per cent); women and child welfare, SCP, TSP, housing, rural employment, pension (4.1 per cent). The overall share of social services in the Union Budget is reduced from 7.5 per cent in 2022-23 to 5.7 per cent in 2023-24. Though National Education Policy, 2020 recommended 6 per cent of GDP to be allocated to education, it gets less than half the amount. The allocation for agriculture and allied sectors, including PM-KISAN, is Rs 1.4 lakh crore, lower than the budget estimate for 2022-23.

Budgetary Allocations to Reduce Gender Gap

First of all, the budget overlooks the gender gap in five important areas. One, we still have an adverse sex ratio. Second is education, right from school to college education, there is a big gender gap. Third is employment, the work participation of women has been continuously

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declining since. Economic independence is the minimum necessary condition for a woman to lead a dignified life. Fourth is decision making, there is a woman finance minister, but her whole team is composed of men, you don't see any gender economists. There is no shortage of gender economists or women's studies experts who are experienced in gender mainstreaming, but they are still not consulted. Feminist Policy Collective had submitted detailed pre-budget recommendations after several consultations with different stake holders. But none of them are included in the Union Budget. Fifth is gender-based violence which has escalated so much. We need affirmative action towards responsiveness to all intersectional vulnerabilities, especially for Dalit and Adivasi women. Women from these minorities, and also working-class women, have hardships, especially in the post-Covid19 scenario and amid inflation, and extremely high youth unemployment. So I think it is not only the allocation, but also how you design the programme that is equally important.

Budget for Gender Equity Concerns

This year's desired or estimated budget for women and child development is Rs 25,448 crore which is barely up from the previous year. There is no substantial increase in portfolio allocation related to the umbrella scheme Mission Shakti, an integrated women empowerment programme as umbrella scheme for the safety, security and empowerment of women for implementation during the 15th Finance Commission period from 2021-22 to 2025-26; that has two action agenda under *Samarthya* and *Sambhal* under the Ministry of Women and Child Development. PM Garib Kalyan, PM Poshan, Maternity support, National Social Assistance Programme, Mahila Samman Patra, schemes for Self-employed women are inadequately funded. Financial services for self-help groups (SHGs) and micro entrepreneurs mediated through private players, instead of doing good, just harm the poor women and keep them perpetually indebted. As per the *Economic Survey 2022-23*, out of 1.2 crore total number of SHGs, 88 per cent are all-women SHGs catering to 14.2 crore households. To fulfil the promise of empowering SHGs and micro entrepreneurs, the regulations to curtail nefarious activities of private microfinance institutions is need of an hour.

The transgender community expected a comprehensive development commitment from the Union Budget, beyond a poorly funded *Garima Grih*.

Education

Even when the National Education Policy, 2020 has recommended 6 per cent of GDP for education, the current budget had allocated less than half, i.e. 2.9 per cent of GDP to school and university education. As a ratio to GDP, the allocation for education has witnessed a steady decline from 0.63 per cent in 2013-14 to 0.37 per cent in the present budget. India is on course to be the third largest economy, but we will continue to be at the bottom in terms of the quality of life of people.

Due to the pandemic, 3 crore Indian children and young adults have been 'forced out' of the educational institutions. I wouldn't call this phenomenon as children having 'dropped out' as if they willingly stopped going to school. It is the worsening economic condition of their family that has snatched away educational opportunities from them. They have already lost 20 months of studies. The ASER report says that many of them are taking admission, but how are they going to cope with the lag? So many children refuse to go because those who have had

resources, have moved ahead by two classes, while poor children will be left behind, and they will be called laggards, stupid and losers. In the hybrid model of teaching-learning, the students must have access to smartphones/notepads. And, in most families, if there is one smartphone/notepad, it goes to the boy — the girl doesn't get it. And that is the moment that girls stop going to school. The out of school/college Indian girls are forcibly married off or trafficked. In higher education, new private universities are charging very high fees. So, you now reach a stage where children from the marginalized sections are able to clear the central exams, and even if they get marks above the cut-off, but they don't have money to pay the full fees.

Health

The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has been allocated 16.5 per cent more funds than last year. This is loaded because a lot of concerns regarding sexual and reproductive health fall in this category. But we also have high rates of maternal mortality. What can we take away from this? Women are also vulnerable to cancer — sanitation plays a role in this. How are you going to strengthen the public health system? Will you provide more services or subsidize the private sector? The private sector doesn't care — it will flourish at the cost of taxpayers' money. The establishment of 157 new nursing colleges co-located with medical colleges has been promised in the Budget.

But the Budget is silent about Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers. The total allocation for the National Social Assistance scheme, *aanganwadis*, the National Livelihood Mission and nutrition programmes has stagnated at less than Rs 60,000 crore. ASHA and Anganwadi workers, applauded by WHO are left in lurch. Though they are employed by the state, they do not have even the stipulated minimum wages and other social protection as they are labelled as 'volunteers', not 'workers' and are given miserly amount in the name of 'honorarium' and ASHA's are given performance linked nominal incentives. As a ratio to GDP, the allocation for the above anti-poverty programmes has declined from 0.79 per cent in 2022-23 to 0.53 per cent. The other two major programmes are the drinking water and housing programmes with an overall allocation of Rs 1.5 lakh crore and an increase of 13 per cent from the revised estimate of 2022-23, but still below the budget estimate of 2021-22. The health sectors has seen a marginal improvement from the budget estimates for 2022-23, but this is totally inadequate in terms of the requirement. Even for public health, additional budgets are needed, for quality public health infrastructure and more human resources in terms of doctors, specialists, nurses and health administrators and technicians. Only 80 per cent of sanctioned doctor posts were filled in the Primary Health Centres and only 36 per cent of sanctioned posts for specialist doctor posts were filled in Community Health Centres according to the Accountability Initiative. Support to private health insurance companies do not serve the interests of the poverty groups.

MGNREGA's the financial allocation has been cut to Rs 60,000 crore which will not be able to fund 40 days of work to the unemployed rural men and women as against the stipulated 100 day of paid-work. The actual expenditure in 2021-22 was Rs 98,468 crore and the expected expenditure in 2022-23 is Rs 89,400 crore. This is really distressing as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) data indicate high levels of youth unemployment, continued precarity and constrained household consumption.

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Slashing of Minority Scheme Funds

The reduction of financial allocation by 38 per cent for the Ministry of Minority Affairs as compared to the previous year will adversely impact developmental needs of women from minority religious groups. When it comes to Dalits, Muslims, and so on, there's a lot of invisibilisation. They will suffer the most due to the reduced financial allocations for in the Ministry of Minority Affairs, SC Funds, funds for Specially Vulnerable Tribal Groups, never reach the groups. So many student scholarships have been slashed. Schemes for self-employment, entrepreneurship, supply of clean water, affordable housing — they're not there. This gives a message that minorities are secondary citizens; they are not part of the development endeavour. This is the first time that such a reduction has happened and where this is categorically implied. Mainstream economists applaud slashing the MGNREGA budget because they see it as a leakage. This is the difference in logic and terminology that's affecting everyone.

Food Security

The food subsidy has been cut by 31 per cent from Rs 2.87 lakh crore to Rs 1.97 lakh crore and the fertiliser subsidy by over 22 per cent from Rs 2.25 lakh crore to Rs 1.75 lakh crore. The allocation for food procurement and market intervention has been reduced from Rs 72,000 crore to Rs 60,000 crore. This is really sad when National Family Health Survey between 2019 and 2021 (NFHS 5) found increased malnutrition among children- as many as 36 per cent of India's children were stunted or short for their age, 19 per cent had low weight for height and 32 per cent had low weight for age.

Problematic vocabulary

In the discourse on the union budget and allocation of financial and human resources, it is a matter of serious concern to initiate dialogue on anti-poor vocabulary used by the mainstream economists who are dominating the print and electronic media. They are utterly insensitive to the intersectional gendered marginalities of caste, ethnicity, religion, disability, regions. Anything that is targeted to the poor and marginalised gets trivialised as 'sops', 'populism', 'revadis' and the poor are treated as 'sponge' on the economy and are classified as 'beneficiaries' instead of 'right holder'. Proper terms such as 'social security', 'social protection', 'support measures must be used when financial resources are allocated for the marginalised communities.' The contribution of the working masses in the farms and factories, services and mines, sanitation and forests must be seen from the human development perspectives and their entitlements are projected as rights-right to food, health, education, employment, skilling, dignified life and freedom from violence.

Conclusion

The Union Budget 2023 has given significant relief to the middle classes; however, India's vast majority of working people in rural, tribal and urban areas facing intersectional realities need more focused budgetary support from the Union Government as centralised taxation system has depleted resources of the state governments drastically. Gender economists and Feminist

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Policy Collective had submitted pre-budget recommendations after detailed national level deliberations with gender economists and women's rights groups with an aim of Transformative Financing for Women and Girls. But none of these recommendations find a place in the Union Budget 2023-24.

Even when the budget talks about Green Growth, the major agent of it who are women farmers in the subsistence sector are bypassed in the budget. Though the union budget aims to 'Reaching the last mile', no plan of action is suggested for increasing women's work participation in the economy. According to Economic Survey 2022-2023, Female Labour Force Participation Rate increased from 19.7 per cent in 2018-19 to 27.7 per cent in 2020-21 which is also abysmally low. If we compare the current social sector expenditure with that of 2009-10, it has gone down by 18 per cent in real terms. Centralisation of taxes through GST has made states starved of funds in the post-pandemic period. The Union Budget needs to make a provision for interest free loans to the states. A total 60 centrally sponsored schemes and 40 state specific schemes need adequate funds from the centre to fulfil the basic needs of a large majority of masses reeling under poverty, hunger, deprivation of education, sanitation and health services. Gender economists have demanded urgent action to address youth unemployment.

Gender commitments need to transform into financial commitments. We need to create systems and functionaries working at the ground level to reduce inequality of income and opportunities. The inclusion of women at every level is extremely important, not tokenism. We need more gender-sensitive economists and decision-makers.