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# Quantifying gender in the national budget

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By now it has been established that women have less access to opportunities for social, economic and political advancement. National and international efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment have included calling for greater access to education and health services, increased participation in the labour force, and greater political representation. Now, these efforts are being backed by fiscal policy—by bringing women's issues to the forefront, for once, when the money is handed out.

In other words, speaking of women empowerment is all well and good but is the government putting its money where its mouth is?

Gender budgeting essentially quantifies (or tries to quantify) how policies affect women and men differently. The finance ministry analyses each ministry's budget to see how effectively they are addressing women's development—for example, what proportion of women make up

their workforce and what proportion of their budget they spend on programmes benefiting women. It identifies projects which are shown to have positive impact on women as well as identify unequal policies. Accordingly, funds are diverted to meet these needs.

Gender budgeting also increases transparency by disaggregating how much of the budget is allocated for women. Worldwide, these allocations of resources are expected to help narrow the gender gap. Bangladesh ranked 48 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2018, leading in the South Asian region. The report, however, noted that the country is still experiencing "a widening gender gap in terms of labour force participation."

After all, gender gaps mean economic losses. In Bangladesh, for example, increasing female participation in the workforce has long been a priority but the fact that women have to perform undocumented care work, means many women

are still unable to join the labour force. Lack of clean water in the vicinity means young girls and women have to walk to fetch water every day instead of attending school or work. Investing in water facilities and providing care services would perhaps go some way in fixing these—providing they are budgeted for.

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Bangladesh has been undertaking gender budgeting for a decade now—back in 2009, it started with four ministries. Last year, 29.65 percent of the budget overall was allocated for the benefit of women; this year, it is 30.82 percent of the proposed budget, or Tk 1,61,247 crore.

The land ministry, for example, which manages land records and oversees the distribution of khas lands, has allocated only 10.38 percent of its budget to women in the coming year. Historically, women's names have been excluded from land records of their inherited and marital property, and have been left out when khas land is distributed. The land ministry's gender budget cites their work on digitisation of land records to include women's names on ownership documents as proof that women's land rights and social security are being ensured.

Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, associate professor of economics at the University of Dhaka, undertook a qualitative analysis of several ministries' gender budgets last year. Commissioned by the non-governmental organisation Manusher Jonno Foundation, she analysed the gender budget of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA), which while dedicating most of its budget to women (76.36 percent), still had a low proportion of female officers and staff.

Dr Bidisha also undertook separate analyses of the Ministry of Labour and Employment and the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment. The former allocated 39.55 percent of its budget to women and the latter, 46.27 percent, this year.

However, the methodology of the actual gender budgeting is a point of contention for academics and activists.

"Gender budgeting is largely done on an ad hoc basis. There could be subjective bias in their analysis," says Dr Bidisha. Each ministry analyses its own projects, assigning scores out of 100, on how gender sensitive these are based on a set of 14 criteria. These are then sent to the Ministry of Finance which applies this data using the Recurrent, Capital, Gender and Poverty (RCGP) model. The result is gender-disaggregated budget figures for each ministry.

Dr Bidisha gives the example of training programmes which MOWCA prioritises. "While training centres may have been created in remote areas, if there is no transport to get there or no one else to take care of their domestic responsibilities while away, women who these programmes are intended for may not be able to avail these training facilities," she says.

Poor inter-ministry coordination is another issue. For instance, Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)—a nationwide programme under which 30 kilogrammes of rice are provided to 10 lakh poor, rural women every month—is under the purview of several ministries. A lack of coordination between MOWCA and the other ministries, whose work overlap on programmes such as VGD, leads to inefficiency. "This is why