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Gender Budgeting

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The integration of a gender perspective into budgetary analysis and decision-making processes was included in the Beijing Platform for Action of the 1995 United Nations World Conference for Women. The impetus for this call to mainstream gender into economic policy was the recognition that many government commitments for gender equality and women's empowerment remained paper promises, lacking the necessary resources for implementation. At the time 'women's budgets', as they were initially termed, already had been initiated in a few countries including Australia (1984), UK (1989) Philippines (1995) and South Africa (1996). These initiatives were challenging assumptions that budgets were 'gender neutral' in their impacts. Both revenue and expenditures were identified for their role in delivering policies and programs that aggravated, left unchanged or reduced inequalities arising from gender power relations. In the following decades a variety of gender-responsive budget initiatives (or gender budgets as they are now commonly termed) emerged in over 100 countries engaging participants from governments, civil society groups, international organizations and researchers. As a result there now exists a substantial body of theory and practice in relation to gender-responsive budgeting.

Gender budgets are neither separate budgets for women, nor are they concerned with whether there is equal spending on men and women. Rather they involve identifying gender gaps and unmet needs and implementing gender sensitive processes throughout the policy, planning and budget cycles. Gender budgets recognize that the impacts of government budgets occur through a variety of channels, both direct and indirect (Elson and Sharp 2011). The direct channels of impact include the provision of government goods and services, public sector employment opportunities, cash payments, user charges and through the raising of taxation revenues. The indirect effects manifest through their influence on the private sector and the macroeconomic aggregates of employment, prices, investment, and incomes. Gender analysis is needed to examine how these direct and indirect effects of budgets and policies impact differentially on different groups of men and women. Gender responsive budgeting occurs with changes to decision-making processes and priorities so that the budget and policies respond to the needs of women and men in ways consistent with gender equality, women's empowerment and the fulfillment of women's human rights.

The majority of the gender-responsive budget literature provides practical guidance for integrating gender into budgetary analyses and decision-making processes. This reflects that gender budgeting has emerged out of feminist practical politics. As a

result, a variety of concepts, tools and strategies have been developed to facilitate both the analysis and political engagement around the budget. Common enabling factors for the implementation of gender-responsive budgeting include high level political commitment, supportive institutional arrangements, participation by the women's movement and civil society and adequate technical and advocacy capacities (see Budlender 2005). Moreover, there has been a theoretical widening of the framing strategies to include human rights and capabilities and well as gender mainstreaming. Research on the theoretical underpinnings and capacities of gender budgeting to achieve change also has included the feminist critiques of macroeconomics and feminist theorizing of the state.

Central to the feminist critique of macroeconomic policy is the argument that ignoring women's economic contributions in the form of unpaid work in the household, voluntary community work, subsistence and informal sector employment can undermine the effectiveness of these policies. These unpaid economic contributions are deemed significant in how the economy operates. Furthermore, unpaid work contributions are based on a gender division of labor that gives rise to gender differences that are structural to the economy. In this way feminist economists have created a space to argue that gender matters for policy efficiency as well as for equity. Studies of developing countries have shown, for example, that reducing gender inequality in education enrolments, the labor market or time burdens leads to rises in productivity and economic growth.

The feminist critique of conventional macroeconomics further argues that effective budgeting require a conceptual framework that incorporates the gendered care economy into the total flow of national income and output. In so doing, interactions between paid and the unpaid activities critical to macroeconomic policy are brought into view (Elson 1998; Himmelweit 2002). The unpaid care sector, aided by inputs provided by the public sector, is argued to underpin macroeconomic growth because it plays a crucial role in producing the labor force and developing and maintaining the social context in which economic activities take place, including the creation of social assets such as sense of community, responsibility and trust. Thus, in contrast to conventional macroeconomics, which ignores how the labor force comes into existence, labor is theorized as an input into production which is itself produced. Furthermore, long run decisions about social reproduction are expected to have an influence on the quality and quantity of labor available to the paid economy. Thus, budgetary policies, through their impact on household decisions, the labor market and the availability of government services potentially have significant feedback effects on quantity and quality of care activities and economic growth more generally.

One way in which the interdependency of the paid and the unpaid sectors of the economy have been highlighted has been to stress the complementarity of private, unpaid production and public investments in health, education, infrastructure and market access. This is a feature of feminist critiques of austerity budgetary policies following the financial crisis of 2008. Using this framework feminists have pointed to the positive link between equity and growth while noting that women's economic contribution is characterized by absent and biased markets (for example gender segmented labour markets that assign lower sociocultural values to women's work) arising out of inequitable gender relations which need to be taken into account for efficient policy. Significant absent markets characterize much of the reproduction of

the labor force which is work primarily done by women without any cost being accounted for by the market based economy. The latter amounts to a socially determined tax being placed on women's labor (Palmer 1995). Conventional macroeconomic theory and policy by ignoring the ways in which gender relations contribute to distortions in resource allocations caused by absent and biased markets can suggest budgetary reductions which are likely to aggravate these distortions by 'crowding out' women's contribution to economic growth (Elson and Catatay 2000). A key conclusion of the feminist critique of macroeconomics is therefore that gender inequalities are not only unfair but also costly.

SEE ALSO: Carework; Feminist critiques of economics; Gender analysis; Gender and governance; Gender audit; Global restructuring

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