

Gender Budgets as a Tool for Women's Economic Security

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My presentation is a case study of a gender budget initiative in Canada. I represent a community organization whose current main focus is a gender budget initiative. We're in the first 6 months of a 2-year initiative.

First a bit about my organization to set the context for our decision to focus on women and the budget. The United Nations Platform for Action Committee Manitoba or UNPAC was formed in 1995 after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. UNPAC is committed to the ideals of equality, development, and peace as articulated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which is essentially the roadmap to women's equality signed and ratified by 189 countries at the Beijing conference. Our mandate is to work locally and globally to encourage implementation of the promises made in Beijing – we are UNPACking the PFA - and specifically to hold our Manitoba government accountable to promises made (they were represented at the meetings). The past almost 5 years we have looked specifically at the area of Women and the Economy. We chose this focus primarily because we saw the rise of economic fundamentalism across the globe as a major threat to women's equality. We also felt that unless women have economic equality, all other forms of equality are difficult – and in some cases impossible – to achieve.

Our Women & Economy project which preceded our current Gender Budget Project produced a number of resources including the Women & Economy website which some of you may have come across in your research, our "Banging the Door Down: Women & Economy" video and DVD, and our 2-part Women & Economy resource books which are based on the website. The project allowed us to look at a range of issues related to women's experience of the economy including unpaid work, globalization, poverty, pink-collar work, the wage gap, etc. Our website features statistics, activities, and articles on these issues as well as an economics 101 primer. The whole site revolves around the very real and ordinary stories of 30 Manitoba women who speak about their very ordinary experiences of the economy and their thoughts on it. Some of these same women – and others – are featured in our video which is being used to prompt discussion in university classrooms and women's centres across the country.

The Women & Economy project gave women in Manitoba – and others who use our resources - an opportunity to reflect critically on the broad issues surrounding women's experiences of the economy and to critique a system that values monetary transactions above all else leaving much of women's work unaccounted for. However, while this discussion, in my opinion, does lead to empowerment, the facts remain starkly in our faces. Women's poverty rates have remained virtually unchanged over the past 30 years and women remain as time-crunched or "time poor" as ever, perhaps more so. At the same time our government structures continue to be male-dominated, as Monique Bégin

mentioned last evening. We lag far behind countries such as the Netherlands, South Africa, and Rwanda when it comes to women's representation. In Manitoba we're fewer than 1/4 of elected leaders. Meanwhile much of government policy remains gender-blind and in some cases blatantly sexist. It was time for us to find a way to change these very structures in the shorter term while remaining firmly committed to our long-term vision of a very different kind of world. And so, inspired by women around the world, we decided to make government budgets – specifically our Manitoba government's budget – the focus of our next several years.

I'd like to explore the strategies we are using and then finish with a discussion on the potential of gender budgets to meet women's economic security needs.

First a number of comments about gender budgets to make sure we're all on the same page. Note that a new paper by Isabella Bakker provides a helpful introduction to gender budgets.

1. Gender budgets are not a separate budget for women but rather a way of looking at the budget in order to analyze the effect of it on women and men, girls and boys and within that different groups of women/men, girls/boys. Gender-sensitive budgets is probably a better term to use.
2. Gender budgets are about equality but they are also about efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and transparency. For example, gender budget initiatives can highlight programs that are not working. Gender budgets then are clearly for everyone, not just women.
3. Gender budgets are about accountability, not just in terms of how a government spends/receives money but also about how a government honours its human rights commitments (for us of course the primary document is the Beijing Platform for Action but we also use CEDAW and the UN Covenant on Social, Cultural, and Economic Rights and the MDGs). In many countries, promises are made but money is not there to implement the promises. GBIs offer a way to address that discrepancy.
4. To give you an idea of their scope, gender-sensitive budget initiatives have taken place in more than 60 countries around the world (in general, North America lags behind)

As for our particular strategies, the overall goal of our particular project is to reduce women's poverty. We are not simply focused on poverty of money but also poverty of time because we see that women in Manitoba (as in the rest of the world) experience both forms of poverty and we see the budget as a policy document that can address both.

We are working to meet our objective through four strategies.

1. The first strategy is education – educating women on the budget process using the assumption that if a woman can understand a household budget, she can understand the basic principles of a provincial budget.
2. Our second strategy is consultation – consulting with as many women as possible from diverse backgrounds in order to hear their ideas both on government spending and on government revenue. We are making particular effort to reach

low-income women as it is our understanding that if a government budget doesn't work for society's most vulnerable citizens, who does it work for?

We are accomplishing these first two goals by organizing province-wide popular education workshops that are part education and part consultation. (We are committed to sharing our workshop materials so that others may benefit from our work.)

These first two strategies – education and consultation - fall under our grassroots approach while the second two we call the “treetops” approach.

3. Our third strategy is lobbying – we have already had a number of meetings with both our Minister of Finance and staff at Treasury Board working with them to implement GBA in the budget process. Along with this direct relationship we also lobby whenever and wherever we can. We'll be there on Budget Day but we're also vocal at other times on various issues related to women's economic equality for example housing and child care. As well, at the close of our workshops women write letters to their MLAs asking that gender analysis be used in the budget process and naming their specific concerns.
4. Our fourth and final strategy – which was added since the project began - is creating alternatives. Several months after we began our project we were invited by CCPA-Manitoba to co-chair the Manitoba Alternative Provincial Budget. CCPA-Manitoba values our ability to consult with grassroots people on budget priorities – something they don't have the capacity to do. And we are extremely pleased that next year's Alternative Provincial Budget will be gender-sensitive.

So do gender budgets have the potential to meet women's economic security needs? Are gender budgets a strategy that can be used in the future? More specifically, does our project have the potential to make a real difference in the relatively short-term in Manitoba?

Elsewhere gender budgets have demonstrated successes. Two short examples:

1. The Australia Women's Budget which began in 1984 (they were the pioneers followed by South Africa) led to a significant increase in spending in areas of importance to women. Between 1985 and 1996 federal assistance to families with children rose 27% while assistance to the aged rose 24%. There was also a five-fold increase in child care places for working women. The Women's Budget served as an “early-warning system” when a neo-liberal agenda took hold. The Women's office was able to identify in advance what areas were likely to be cut and argue against those cuts.
2. In Korea, gender budget initiatives showed that some women-related policies reinforced gender stereotypes such as beauty contests (over 100 held nationally), or a government sponsored ‘Harmonious Couple Award’ (originally called the ‘Equal Couple Award’), which although recognizing mutual respect and cooperation, placed a higher emphasis on women's traditional virtues rather than on sharing household chores, equal decision-making, or sharing property. The Korean initiative used government policy to demonstrate instances of lack of real government commitment to gender equality.

From our perspective, a success has been simply the ability of gender budget initiatives to involve women in the budget process and to generate interest and ideas. While the assumption is frequently made that people can't understand budgets and are not interested in them, they actually are! And we've found that low-income women have some of the best ideas.

Gender budget initiatives have the biggest potential for change when there is a receptive political environment. Our Minister of Finance, Greg Selinger, once co-chaired the Alternative Federal Budget and has a vested interest in getting people more involved in the budget process. When elected 7 years ago, he initiated a public consultation process. In the UK, the fact that 2 Cabinet Ministers had young children while in office, assisted their efforts.

But there are certainly limitations, the first of which is simply time. Involving oneself in the government budget process takes time – something most of us have not enough of, especially those of us who are simply trying to keep the pieces of our lives together. At UNPAC we have worked to address this limitation by not limiting our consultation to full-day workshops but also holding more informal discussions at places such as family drop-in centres. (Interestingly enough at one session we decided to skip the education piece and go right to consultations and what we found was that after sharing their ideas women were quite eager to find out a little more about the whole budget process.)

A second limitation is the whole idea of working to change a structure that is so obviously and deeply patriarchal. For those who no longer have hope that the legislative structure can be made to work for all but rather who believe that we need to start over with a whole new way of governing ourselves, then gender-budgets are too small. You have to believe in government – at some level – in order to criticize it. I suppose that's why we're here at this conference. But nevertheless, even if we do believe in government the limitations of the budget process can be – or simply are – extremely frustrating. (At last year's public budget consultation there was a groundswell of people saying they didn't want to rank health over childcare over infrastructure. Still, budgets are about ranking.)

This leads to a third challenge which is simply the difficulty of trying to come up with creative, workable ideas and solutions that will change women's situation (preferably over the short-term). Bureaucrats are not very imaginative souls in my experience but coming up with ideas is a challenge for any of us. Thankfully we've met some wonderfully imaginative folks so far and hope to meet a lot more.

In conclusion, budgets are perhaps the biggest policy document of a government and I do believe that if they can be made more gender-sensitive - if GBA can be inserted in the budget process - then we will start to see significant improvements in women's economic situation.