

## Is this Really a Budget for Women?

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It is remarkable how often the representation of things - and therefore the public perception of them - is quite distant from the reality. This is particularly true in our age of twenty four hour news coverage and instant reactions, when commentators are forced to respond instantaneously to "news" and public statements without getting a chance to examine the details or consider the full implications. All this has been very evident in the media responses to Union Budget 2013-14.

It has been portrayed as "a budget for women", smugly declared as such by spokespersons for the government and the ruling party and reiterated by some observers who have not bothered to go beyond the touchy-feely promises made by the Finance Minister in his budget speech.

It is certainly true that the speech was full of references to women and the FM's concern for them was displayed prominently on his sleeve. Clearly the table-thumping women MPs who endorsed certain statements of the Finance Minister appeared to concur with his expressed sentiments.

Consider just some of the more prominent such snippets: "Women belonging to the most vulnerable groups, including single women and widows, must be able to live with self-esteem and dignity. Young women face gender discrimination everywhere, especially at the work place. ... We have a collective responsibility to ensure the dignity and safety of women. Recent incidents have cast a long, dark shadow on our liberal and progressive credentials. As more women enter public spaces – for education or work or access to services or leisure – there are more reports of violence against them. We stand in solidarity with our girl children and women. And we pledge to do everything possible to empower them and to keep them safe and secure."

Fine words, certainly. And brave words, coming from an important representative of a government that has done very little thus far in the face of the months of massive protests against the increasing physical insecurity that women face all over India. Even perhaps slightly cynical words, considering the appallingly crass and counterproductive ordinance that the central government has seen fit to introduce with respect to crimes against women, which goes in the face of the [excellent recommendations of its own Verma Commission](#).

So much for the words; what did the Finance Minister actually deliver for women? Precious little, it turns out, and that too in such a patronising and even offensive manner that these "gifts" may turn out to alienate the very constituency he was apparently seeking to satisfy.

Two widely discussed "initiatives" of this Budget have been presented as indications of the government's concern for women. Both of them make the initial mistake of seeing women as a vote bank or vulnerable group that can be placated with a specifically directed fund in their name.

The first is the plan to provide for a dedicated Women's Bank, one that "lends mostly to women and women-run businesses, that supports women SHGs and women's

livelihood, that employs predominantly women, and that addresses gender related aspects of empowerment and financial inclusion" with initial capital of Rs 1,000 crore provided by the government. This idea misses the basic concern that most women have with the difficulties of accessing institutional finance, which is that they are rarely if ever treated as equals. Instead, they are always seen as somehow separate (and typically inferior) to "normal" (male) users of the financial system.

This attitude is also pervasive in the current structure of microfinance in India and even in the SBL (Self Help Group-Bank Linkage) programme that is widely touted as a boon for women. The unstated but underlying perception is that men (or the rich) can access proper institutional finance, while there is microfinance for women (or the poor). A women-only bank feeds into this distorted vision. Instead of making the proper access of all women to all institutional finance a major policy priority and taking proactive steps in this regard, women are being given this little present of their own bank, all to themselves, with even all women employees! One can almost see the cute pink colours possibly planned for the entrance...

It is even possible that confining the concern about women's access to institutional finance to such token measures will have the opposite effect. It is only too easy to picture how women seeking to open accounts or access loans from scheduled commercial banks could be turned away and told to go off instead to the Women's Bank, where they will get dedicated service. How can such financial ghettoisation can be viewed as progress towards women's economic empowerment? And did the condescending nature of such a proposal strike no one in the government before it was publicly presented?

But the second initiative may be even worse in the degree of insensitivity that it displays. This is the proposal to set up [a fund \("let us call it the Nirbhaya Fund"](#) said the Minister, without batting an eyelid or even having the grace to blush) of Rs 1000 crore to fund initiatives to ensure women's safety. Once again this completely misses the point. The safety of women and girls - and indeed the safety of men and boys and babies and old people and everyone else - is the responsibility of the state. Physical security is the right of every citizen of the country. It is not a gift from a "caring" government to women who are supposed to be grateful for being remembered.

The massive public protests that have swept across India over the past few months have been mostly about the state's failure to protect its citizens, and the social, legal, institutional and cultural context in which this is playing out. Everyone in the country has been shaken by these protests and by the terrible reality of quotidian violence against women in particular that they reveal. They obviously call for multi-pronged action by the state and by non-state actors.

Some important directions in this regard have already been noted in the recommendations of the Verma Commission. This noted, inter alia, not just the need to transform processes, structures and attitudes, but also the role played by the availability of physical infrastructure and public amenities and services. A government that is truly concerned about this issue would have looked at the recommendations carefully and realised the vastness, complexity and urgency of the task at hand. They may even have realised how, in this context, this little fund of Rs 1000 crore almost comes across as an insult.

Indeed, this propensity of the central government to see itself as a "mai-baap" state that provides gifts of little crumbs of so-called welfare measures to a grateful populace imbued much of the FM's speech. It was very much in evidence at the close of the speech, when cash transfers - now described as the Direct Benefit Scheme - were cited as evidence of the government's concern for its people. Here is what the FM had to say "to the poor of India" (sic): "All around us, we see the smiles on the faces of the dalit girls and the tribal boys who have received their scholarships. We see the happiness on the faces of the pregnant women who are assured that the Government cares for the mother and the child before and after child birth." Surely this cringe-making statement requires no further critical commentary?

It is only to be hoped that this condescending attitude is not shared by others in the government, because as it happens the electorate of this country have outgrown this perception quite some time ago. Citizens across India - even the poorest ones, even women - are now more conscious of their rights, and of the social contract that is expressed in our Constitution, which clearly lays out the duties of the State. They are also much more conscious of the continuing failures of our governments to meet many if not most of these basic obligations. And so they are less likely to be impressed by bleeding heart statements of sympathy and more likely to assess the actual implications of government policies, including the fiscal policies embedded in the Budget.

This is where all the Finance Minister's treacherous statements come to naught, because many of the policies implicit or explicit in this fiscal statement have implications that are adverse for most women. The focus on fiscal consolidation in the current year as well as in the Budget are really direct attacks on the material conditions of the citizens (including especially women), because they involve cuts in essential public spending that is required to meet their social and economic rights.

It is now widely acknowledged that public spending plays a critical macroeconomic role – in providing essential infrastructure that is the basis for future growth, in improving the conditions of life and productivity of the people as a whole, in generating internal demand at a time when external demand is problematic, and in ensuring some stability in the prices of essential items of mass consumption. But in addition, especially in India where there are such huge deficits in the provision of basic infrastructure, amenities and social services, it contributes directly to the conditions of life especially of women, who have to confront the consequences of such inadequacy in multiple ways in their daily lives. Cuts in such spending, or inadequate increases, therefore have absolutely direct negative impacts.

This is why the "achievement" of the current fiscal year, of containing the fiscal deficit to an "acceptable" level of 5.2 per cent of GDP essentially through sharp reductions in much-needed Plan spending, is so problematic. The revised estimates for the current fiscal year show that Plan spending was nearly 20 per cent below the budget estimates for 2012-13. This was effected by across the board cuts in all the major sectors, including those that directly affect the livelihood and well-being of the people. Some sectors suffered severe cuts, with unintended consequences that we may have yet to experience – for example, actual plan spending on irrigation and flood control is estimated to be only one-third of the budget amount, while important sectors like industry and minerals, science and technology and communications also

suffered deep cuts. Even agriculture, rural development and social services (health and education) experienced sharp cuts in comparison to budget allocations.

Let us bear in mind that India must be the only country in the world where public delivery of essential social services is presented as government “schemes” that are gifts from the state to the people, rather than the rights of citizens that simply must be met through public delivery. We underprovide essential health services and then try to give them on the cheap through the National Rural (and now Urban) Health Mission, which relies on underpaid women workers to run. We underprovide education and then say we are putting money into “Abhiyans” for universal schooling.

Even basic nutrition and antenatal and postnatal services that should be common-and-garden public services (and are precisely that in most countries) are [presented in the form of the “Integrated Child Development Scheme”](#). We proudly declare that the ICDS is the largest such scheme in the world, which it is simply because in no other country would this be called a scheme. And then we barely provide any funding for it, so that it has not yet even been universalised despite the Supreme Court’s strictures over nearly a decade, and also relies on underpaid women working with hardly any facilities who are not even described as workers. And then in turn we are very surprised when it does not deliver expected results despite the tiny dribble of resources it receives.

In the proposed Budget, while Plan outlays have been increased slightly over the low revised estimates of the current year, they show hardly any increase when compared to the budget estimates for the current year. Thus the food subsidy is supposed to increase by only Rs 5000 crore to Rs 90,000 crore, even though the Centre still plans to bring in the food security bill. Education spending has also been suppressed. The outlay for school education is only 8 per cent more than the current year’s budget estimate and 15 per cent higher than actual spending this year, which means it will just barely increase as a share of nominal GDP. Ditto for health spending: while the increase of budgeted outlay over revised actual spending seems high (28 per cent) in fact the increase compared to the previous year’s budget is only 8 per cent. So it remains to be seen how much new spending is actually allowed even in something as essential as health.

The supposedly flagship programme MNREGA has been allocated Rs 33,000 crore – exactly the same as the current year’s allocation, which means a significant decline in real constant price terms. Across the board there is this niggardly approach to essential public spending.

All this is made much worse by the fact that the FM is clearly relying on a huge reduction in the fuel subsidy by more than Rs 30,000 crore. While global energy prices still ruling very high, this can only mean that the central government is preparing to force Indian consumers to pay global prices for fuel, even though per capita incomes are only a small fraction of the global average. (Consider this thought: Rs 34 per day is considered to be sufficient for a person to be classified as “not poor” in urban India, so obviously s/he can afford to pay Rs 65-70 per litre for diesel directly or indirectly.) Since fuel is a universal intermediate, this is bound to affect all other prices, including those of essential goods and services like food, transport and so on.

This is an aggressively inflationary move, which will definitely affect the prices of food, essential commodities and transport in the coming months. Meanwhile, nothing has really been provided (or even thought of) in terms of expanding good quality employment or ensuring the viability of small scale production of goods and services. And the government persists in its attempt to provide basic public services through the underpaid labour of women who are not treated as real "workers". So how can the women of India be expected to respond to this Budget positively?

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