



## THE WAY FORWARD

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Worldwide, gender-responsive budgeting is recognised as an important mechanism for implementing the gender equality commitments of governments. In Australia, Gender/Women's Budget Statements are a critical component of this budgetary approach to transforming gender relations. However, Australia's long 40-year history reveals considerable waxing and waning by governments in the use of their budgets to reduce gender inequalities. A key lesson during this period has been how much political and economic context matters to the conduct of gender-responsive budgeting. Political and economic circumstances can either contribute to or reverse hard-won gender equality gains.

The international political and economic context emerging in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows signs of increasing uncertainty and even causing tectonic upheaval. The world is experiencing the escalating effects and costs of global warming, along with a shift in post World War II rules and norms, with funding cuts to international organisations (UN, WHO) and to aid to the poorest countries (USAID), and a rise of militarism, nationalism and right-wing political parties. These patterns have been accompanied by the extreme concentration of wealth amongst the richest men and their families worldwide, the increased power of large corporations, many with balance sheets bigger than countries, and exploitative labour market systems.

Assaults on diversity, equality and inclusion with subsequent defunding of programs, infrastructure and data collection, best epitomised by the Trump administration in the USA, are likely to have significant lasting effects on the political and economic policy landscape, not only in the United States but across the world. Australia will not be immune from the turbulence or the change, and there will be potentially wide-ranging disruptive effects for the country's gender equality strategies and resourcing unless we become more willing to make informed, sometime contentious, choices as a nation.

Our reflection on the future of gender-responsive budgeting begins with a consideration of the potential of Gender/Women's Budget Statements to progress women's aspirations by promoting awareness, accountability and changing budgets. This framework helps to reposition the statements within Australia's gender-responsive budgeting approach. We have also reflected on the technical and political aspects of budgeting to understand the momentum for gender-responsive budgeting in Australia. Finally, we have called for big ideas to ensure the transformative ambition of gender-responsive budgeting, including the development of an alternative, feminist, economic strategy, a progressive role of government, and the strengthening of democratic participatory processes.

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## How can Gender/Women's Budget Statements progress the aspirations of gender-responsive budgeting?<sup>2</sup>

In less than a decade, governments in Australia have made notable progress in reintroducing, and in some cases reinvigorating, Gender/Women's Budget Statements. These annual public records, not readily available elsewhere, reveal the effects of government spending and revenue raising measures in progressing gender equality commitments, and remain the central conduit for progressing gender-responsive budgeting in Australia.

Only recently has a distinction been made between Gender/Women's Budget Statements and gender-responsive budgeting. In the early period of their development (1984-1990s), the term 'gender-responsive budgeting' was not widely used, and Australia was one of only a handful of countries engaged in the space of gender and budgets. The statements are now positioned differently. Victoria, for example, signifies this with a dedicated section of its Gender Budget Statement addressing gender-responsive budgeting.

At this point in their evolution there is a lack of clarity as to the role of the Gender/Women's Budget Statements. Below we outline potential ways in which the statements might further the aspirations of gender-responsive budgeting and how they might be repositioned to do what they do best.

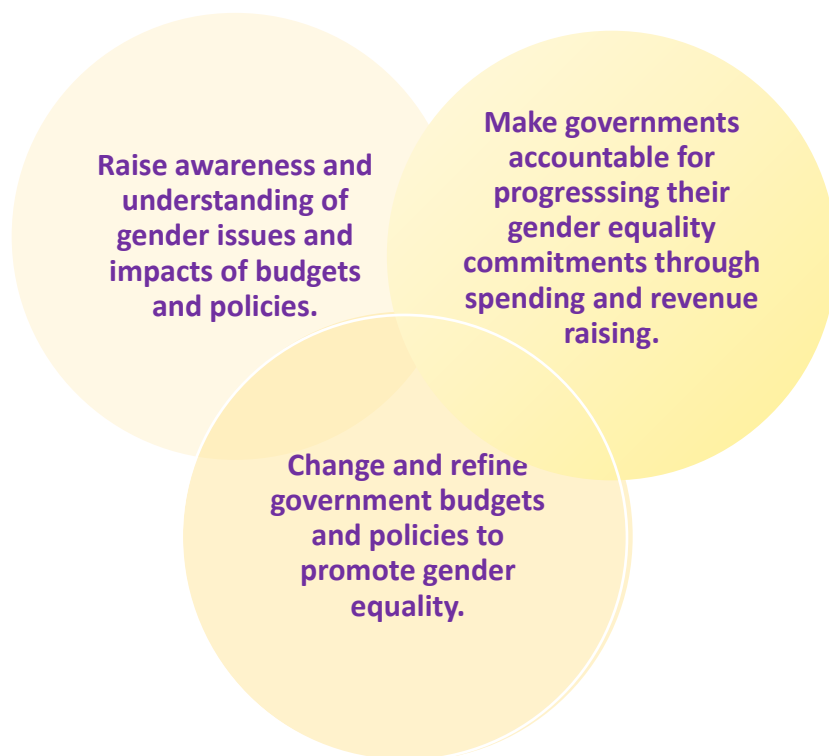


ERA, 3 June 2021 (Instagram)<sup>3</sup>

On the surface, gender-responsive budgeting looks like a technical exercise in budget analysis, after which the evidence is used to adjust the budget priorities and policy design. Nothing could be further from the truth. While it uses the technologies and practices of budgeting, it is also a political project, aspiring to utilise the power of the government purse to change the distribution of income and wealth to reduce gender and other inequalities and transform gender relations.

The aspirations and ideals of gender-responsive budgeting involve engaging with, and transforming, the practices and politics of budgeting by:

- raising awareness of gender issues and impacts embedded in budgets and policies
- making government accountable (by promoting transparency, voice and advocacy, and credibility) for their gender equality commitments through the budget
- changing budgets and policies to promote gender equality.



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Figure 12.1 Progressing gender-responsive budgeting

### ***Raising awareness***

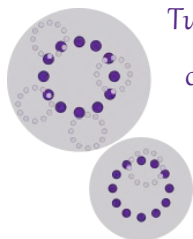
Raising awareness means establishing a political agenda promoting the idea that budgets need to be scrutinised for their gender impacts, and that the gender impacts of a budget are important for society and the economy. This was the focus of the early Australian Gender/Women's Budget Statements (see Case Study 8).

Gender/Women's Budget Statements can raise the awareness of the public, parliament and the bureaucracy by providing:

- a case for actions to promote gender equality
- a rationale for gender-responsive budgeting
- information about the gender equality commitments of the government
- evidence of current gender gaps, structural inequalities, and intersections of gender with other inequalities
- evidence of the gendered impacts of the budget, rejecting of the widespread myth that budgets are gender neutral
- visibility to the economic and well-being contributions of unpaid work and the care economy
- significant coverage of non-gender specific or mainstream expenditures, as well as gender-specific or targeted programs.

Initially, when Victoria reintroduced the Gender Budget Statement, it went to considerable lengths to explain what gender-responsive budgeting was and why the government was doing it, stressing the need to assess the gender impacts of policies and budgets on different groups. Tasmania, NSW and Queensland provide increasing analytical coverage of gender gaps (eg. gender pay gap, labour force participation, women in managerial roles, rates of family and sexual violence) to justify the need for action. All the statements report, in varying degrees of comprehensiveness, against the government's gender equality commitments or priorities set out in their women's strategy. Post-COVID-19 the care economy has received greater visibility in the statements with priority given to childcare, early childhood education and the aged care sector (see Case Studies 9 and 10).

The Gender/Women's Budget Statements provide opportunities for civil society and the media to engage with the gender equality implications of budget measures. Social media has been increasingly used to highlight gender issues, including by women's organisations. Responding to the changing media landscape, governments are reaching out to social media influencers, inviting these new voices, many of whom are young women, to the budget lock-up. Independent and women's media organisations in Australia have given some attention to gender issues in budget analysis, and Gender/Women's Budget Statements have been crucial in achieving this (see Case Study 7). The movement around #CredibleWomen is evidence of this pattern, with women in the media playing a critical role in furthering calls for more attention to gender equality in the budget. However, it has not always been easy for the statements to gain wider political attention in the highly concentrated traditional media landscape in Australia, heavily influenced by the Murdoch media.



*Tucked away amongst the budget papers, generally shunned by the commentariat, sits another paper, one that has the capacity to shape the outcomes for half the population.*

*Harry Chemay, Michael West Media Independent Journalists*

Establishing and maintaining a political agenda for gender-responsive budgeting is vital and the statements can play a primary role in doing this. Awareness raising is an essential first step towards fostering government accountability and the changes to budgets and policies that promote gender equality.

### **Accountability**

Accountability entails holding governments to task for their record of implementing their commitments to gender equality through their budgets. The Gender/Women's Budget Statement, by distilling how the government is fulfilling its commitments to gender equality, is an important mechanism to help women's organisations, media and parliament to hold governments responsible for their political promises. The Gender/Women's Budget Statements themselves signal that women are recognised as a political constituency that the government needs to be accountable to.

Below we consider how the statements can contribute to accountability by promoting transparency, voice and advocacy, and the credibility of the government's gender equality commitments.

**Transparency.** Statements can contribute to making the budget and its reporting clearer, understandable and readily available to the community and oversight bodies.

Transparency over plans for public money is more than making information available. It requires that the community can freely access and understand the budget process and the implications of budget reporting for gender equality.

Transparency is affected by political choices about how budget information addresses 'what' and 'for whom' issues. The pressure is for the statements to be a positive political narrative backed by selective policies and budget decisions to put the government in the best possible light. While governments have been more transparent about the relatively small, specifically targeted allocations to women, the omission of the gender effects of big-ticket items (eg. subsidies, infrastructure and defence spending) undermines transparency.

Transparency of the beneficiaries of budget measures is limited when there is a lack of gender analysis including intersectional analysis. COVID-19 recovery budgets focused on the generation of jobs but lacked clarity about who would benefit from these jobs and the effectiveness of the strategy. Most were offered in the construction sector, despite the fact that the number of jobs generated by construction expenditure is less than what could be generated if the same money was allocated to care industries (see Case Study 5).

The lack of transparency of the South Australian Treasury's four page 2024-25 Women's Statement was somewhat mitigated with a subsequent 23 page publication by the Office for Women providing a more informative gender analysis of the budget's impact on women.

**Voice and advocacy.** Gender/Women's Budget Statements can enable different groups of women, outside and inside government, to participate in the budget debates and processes and have a say on issues that affect them. The inaugural Women's Budget Statement in 1984-85 was used by women politicians in the federal parliament to engage their male colleagues on issues of inadequacy of funding for women's sports.<sup>4</sup> The National Foundation for Australian Women's (NFAW) gender lens of the federal budget has been influential in bringing together the gender expertise of individuals and organisations to review and contest the government's budget decisions and its approach to gender-responsive budgeting. Other organisations, such as GenVic, have produced scorecards assessing the state government's budget allocations against the government's commitments and the priorities identified by women's organisations.

Women's organisations have been vocal at calling for a larger suite of gender-responsive approaches that go beyond the statements to ensure empowerment and participation in budget design. In its response to the 2022-23 October budget, NFAW called for the government to develop an annual program of early consultation with women's organisations before agencies develop their program priorities and bids.

**Credibility.** Credibility refers to the belief that the government is committed to some common goals, which helps build trust in the government. Gender/Women's Budget Statements can help strengthen trust in government on gender equality by highlighting the contributions made by the budget to this goal.

Budgets can have multiple, sometimes contradictory effects on gender equality. For statements to account for this, it is important to include an analysis that enables understanding the cumulative impact of the different measures (see Case Study 4). The statements have been criticised as lacking credibility in accurately reflecting the government budget, as they fail to report on budget cuts that have significant gender impacts. They often reflect the perception of a trade-off between economic and political credibility versus credibility in advancing gender equality.

Statements can help build confidence for gender-responsive budgeting by giving insights into the often invisible bureaucratic and procedural aspects of gender-responsive budgeting. For example, translating gender equality commitments into actions is enhanced if Treasury provides an explicit budget instruction to agencies on addressing gender equality issues, accompanied by a template for integrating these considerations into their budget submissions. Consolidated by Treasury, this whole of government information can serve as a basis for the Gender/Women's Budget Statement.

Credibility and trust in gender-responsive budgeting are also affected by the access governments provide to the gender impact assessments that form the basis of the Gender/Women's Budget Statements. These concerns were heightened by comments by the Minister for Women and Minister for Finance Katy Gallagher, who in 2024 observed that she had neither received a policy submission that cited negative consequences for women, nor was there a clear process for such policies to be revisited and reworked if issues were identified.<sup>5</sup> It's hard to believe that there are no policies with negative impacts on women or on gender equality. Without access to the gender analysis undertaken by agencies, transparency and trust in gender-responsive budgeting work is undermined.

In a step to build confidence and trust, Victoria's 2024-25 Gender Budget Statement provided a rudimentary measure of the performance of its gender impact assessments. Similarly, Tasmania's 2024-25 Gender Budget Statement re-analysed the 2023-24 budget measures, including a review of the impact rating initially attributed.

### *Changing policies and budgets*

Ultimately, gender-responsive budgeting aspires to change policies and budgets in ways that achieve gender equality outcomes. The emerging practices around Gender/Women's Budget Statements indicate that they are part of a broader gender-responsive budgeting system, but thus far, they have only indirectly contributed to changing policies and budgets.

The commitment to publish a statement can sharpen the focus on translating political pressure into actionable decisions on gender equality. Examples of the role of the statement in shaping budget and policy decisions are limited. Ahead of its 2023-24 Women's Budget Statement, Queensland Treasury workshopped budget bids from key agencies to improve the development of the bids, placing greater emphasis on their potential impacts on women's economic opportunities and security. With this new approach the Queensland government moved towards gender-responsive budgeting and the statement served as a catalyst for this shift.

Statements that are well-integrated into the budget process are best placed to contribute to evidence, provided by gender analysis and impact assessments, being used in budget decisions (referred to as 'ex-ante assessments'). This would hopefully result in fostering and recording how gender impact assessments are being included in the information provided to the key budget decision making body, the Expenditure Review Committee. However, statements have mostly been produced as a report of budget decisions already made ('ex-post assessments'). Ex-post assessments can potentially indirectly influence other phases of the budget cycle, including MYEFO, the medium-term budget and the performance budgeting processes, as well as future budgets through their political impact.

Deepening the relationship between Gender/Women's Budget Statements and ex-ante gender impact assessments would assist the budget statement's role in furthering the aspirations of gender-responsive budgeting. However, greater integration of impact assessments and budget statements is not a magic wand. Victoria has a comprehensive gender analysis process (see Case Study 9) but uses selected vignettes to illustrate how gender impact assessments influence program and policy changes. The detailed gender impact assessments are not publically available, limiting visibility into the ways evidence influences budget decisions. This political strategy has sought to make the statement accessible to a wide audience but potentially limits the role of the Gender/Women's Budget Statement in progressing gender-responsive budgeting.

The relationship between the statements and gender-responsive budgeting is an evolving one and is related to how effectively the statements align and progress the aspirations of gender-responsive budgeting by raising awareness, promoting accountability and changing budget decisions (see Box 12.1 over page).

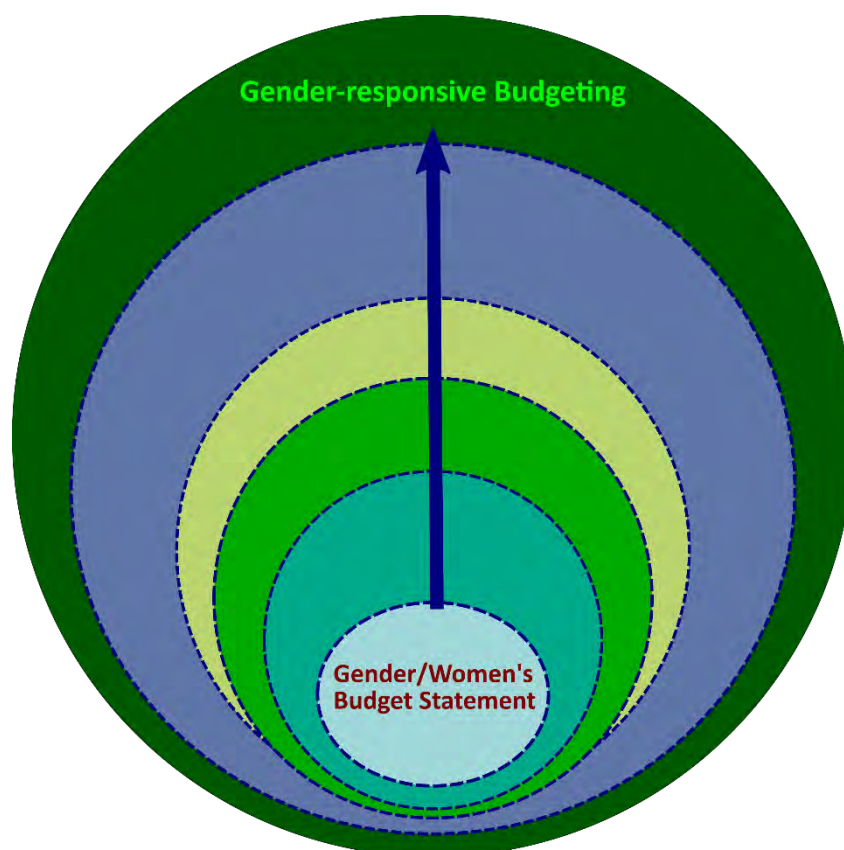


### Box 12.1 Positioning the statements in gender-responsive budgeting

Some Gender/Women's Budget Statements, like those in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, adopt a very modest approach that make a symbolic gesture to recognise women as a political constituency, but are a minimal force in promoting the aspirations of gender-responsive budgeting (see Case Study 9). These modest forms of statements would be positioned at the bottom of the diagram below.

By 2025 Queensland, Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania statements could be positioned in a ring further up as a more developmental means for promoting gender-responsive budgeting. These statements went some way to create an agenda for gender-responsive budgeting with attention to gender analysis and include a framework for assessing how the government is delivering on its gender equality commitments.

Moving along the arrow to a higher position in the rings, statements such as those of Victoria, New South Wales and the federal government serve as more comprehensive means to raise awareness of the gendered impacts of the budget, challenging assumptions that the budget is neutral, improving accountability and transparency and acting as catalysts for, and a record of, changes to policies and budgets.



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## **Maintaining the momentum for gender-responsive budgeting**

Australia's history of gender-responsive budgeting is characterised by uneven developments, continuities and changes, and this pattern could extend into the future. There is scope to be more proactive in instituting changes, and this casebook highlights recent positive developments that could support the sustainability and deepen the work of gender-responsive budgeting. Suggestions include legislating for gender-responsive budgeting, extending a gender perspective to the entire budget cycle and shifting to the use of ex-ante gender impact assessments.

Furthermore, as noted, an over-arching factor in the implementation of gender-responsive budgeting and a challenge to its momentum is the technical and political nature of budgeting. Integrating gender into spending and revenue raising and the budget process requires contending with the politics of budget prioritisation and the technical elements of the budget process (otherwise referred to as the budget cycle or public financial management). The capacity to negotiate the technical and political aspects of budgeting, including tensions and contradictions, will be important in shaping the future of gender-responsive budgeting.

### ***Budgets are technical***

Budgets involve data collection and analysis, forecasting and planning of revenues and expenditures, appropriation and control of funds, evaluation and audit, performance measurement, and budget rules and instructions. Gender-responsive budgeting has to engage with these technical systems and practices (technologies). A 2023 OECD review of progress of Australia's gender-responsive budgeting compared it to best practice and made a number of recommendations to strengthen the gender entry points of the budget and policy system (see Box 12.2).

**Box 12.2 OECD 2023 report – Gender equality in Australia, strengthening gender considerations in policy and budget decisions<sup>6</sup>**

Recommended actions to embed gender-responsive budgeting in government budget systems include:

- legislating gender-responsive budgeting, including setting requirements for gender impact assessments.
- implementing and monitoring gender-responsive budgeting work by establishing a high-level steering group convened by the Office for Women and engaging the Departments of Treasury, Prime-Minister and Cabinet and Ministry of Finance in its design.
- bolstering the evidence base for policies by strengthening the policy coordination function of the Office for Women.
- enhancing the capacity in government to undertake high-quality gender analysis, including expanding the scope of decisions over whether gender impact assessment should be applied; and ensuring that analysis is conducted as early in the policy decision-making process as possible.
- strengthening data availability and awareness, and analysis of gender-disaggregated data to support gender impact assessments and gender-responsive budgeting.
- establishing champions and gender focal points across departments and agencies to encourage the systematic consideration of gender equality issues throughout policy making areas.

There is still space to adopt new technologies, such as audit and medium term expenditure planning, to make greater use of opportunities across the budget cycle to advance gender equality outcomes. Governments may turn to technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analytics to revolutionise their budget process that will pose new challenges.

The budget however is not a ready fit for the ambitious agenda of gender equality. It relies on quantification and performance technologies, such as key performance indicators, audits and impact assessments and this has implications for the incorporation of gender issues. On the one hand, performance technologies facilitate a narrative of the gender impacts using the concepts and language of budgeting, which can be used by feminists advocating economic change. On the other hand, these tools tend to make social issues, including meanings about gender itself, less visible if they are not quantifiable and give gender-responsive budgeting a false appearance of political neutrality.<sup>7</sup> It is not just a matter of making the gender analysis more technical and embedding it into the technocratic budget process. The fundamental issue is that the budget process is political.

## **Budgets are political**

The budget is influenced by the prevailing power relations, competing interests and external pressures affecting how resources are allocated and whether gender considerations are given attention in budget decisions. Effective systems within the budget process to highlight the gender impacts of spending and revenue raising serve to elevate gender equality and women's empowerment in the budget.

The re-introduction of Gender/Women's Budget Statements was a response by governments to quell criticism over ongoing issues around women's safety and gender-blind policy settings. The statement became the key means by which a government could communicate how its activities were having a positive impact on gender equality and demonstrate accountability for its commitments.

Some political influences can have long-lasting positive effects on the momentum and dynamism of gender-responsive budgeting. Government legislation, in response to demands by civil society, can future-proof gender-responsive budgeting. However, the political nature of the budget also provides barriers to the potential of gender-responsive budgeting.

- **Neoliberal ideologies have shaped prevailing macroeconomic policies reducing the space for gender equality.** In Australia, governments of all political persuasions have at various times used macroeconomic rules and targets to constrain policy in the belief it that this approach would demonstrate economic credibility. The Coalition federal government's self-imposed rule that revenue growth as a percentage of GDP should be capped at 23.9% of GDP is such an example. This contestable assumption framed the conversation about budget choices, with an emphasis on spending cuts, rather than raising taxes, to rein in budget deficits, an approach that is particularly adverse for vulnerable groups that depend on government services and payments.<sup>8</sup> Current debates in Europe about increasing defence expenditure further point to the political nature of these rules. Removing debt brakes does not necessarily benefit gender equality because it depends on the drivers behind such removal and the gender impacts of the fiscal policies.
- **Broader political culture, including the international political narratives, play a role in shaping budget priorities and determining the extent to which gender equality and women's empowerment are given focus.** Cultural and political influences can either support or limit the inclusion of gender considerations in budget decisions. Attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion by the Trump administration in the United States have started to influence the political narratives in Australia, including Opposition Liberal Coalition leader, Petter Dutton, promising to curtail the public service, arguing that shrinking this sector would benefit the economy.<sup>9</sup> Any moves in that direction are likely to stall progress on gender equality, hindering developments and reversing the gains made so far in gender-responsive budgeting.

Political and technical drivers have always been central in shaping gender-responsive budgeting and the design of Australia's strategy. However, their interactions are complex, often involving tensions and trade-offs. The Gender/Women's Budget Statement has been criticised as a political tool of the government. To address this, NFAW has proposed to assign the responsibility of producing the annual statement to the Parliamentary Budget Office, which could make it more independent from party politics. This may give it the appearance of a more technical document but could have implications for calling the government to task and building confidence in the governments' credibility on gender-responsive budgeting.

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### **Setting bold ambitions for gender-responsive budgeting**

The momentum to sustain and deepen gender-responsive budgeting to fulfill its transformative aspirations must be maintained with bold and ambitious ideas and action. Some interrelated elements of such bold thinking include:

- an alternative economic strategy
- strengthening democratic participatory processes
- engaging strategically with the state.

### ***An alternative economic strategy***

Women need to participate in the struggle to develop alternative economic strategies that will contest the existing distribution of income, wealth and power and shape how economics can serve a gender equal society. Challenging and modifying mainstream (neoclassical) economic analysis and policies to produce better gender equality outcomes is essential, particularly so for its neoliberal strand of ideology and policies.

This casebook provides a range of examples of how to engage with government spending and taxation and budget processes (see Case Studies 1-5 in particular). Minor changes to mainstream economic policies can provide very limited benefits especially for First Nations women and men and people living in poverty. Major reforms, such as the government funded paid parental leave policy, have taken more than 30 years of campaigning with delays in its full implementation. The progress achieved has largely involved adding gender equality issues to existing economic frameworks. At the federal level, conservative, more neoliberal, Coalition governments have done this in the form of a limited, market friendly gender equality approach. Social democratic-influenced Labor governments have tackled some structural inequalities by incorporating gender equality issues into Keynesian influenced policy frameworks.<sup>10</sup>

The bold idea being promulgated here, is for an alternative economic strategy that will transform the frameworks of fiscal policy and the budget process to address gender inequalities. The development of an alternative and feminist economic strategy requires a recognition that economics, like other knowledges, is developed within a historical context and is embedded with cultural constructions. Critiques of mainstream economics argue that economics is built on dualistic views of knowledge and the social life.

These dualisms include private/public, productive/unproductive, efficiency/equity, individual/society, economy /family, rational/emotional, independent/dependent and paid /unpaid. Such dualisms incorporate the dominant and hierarchical masculine and feminine metaphors of society. This is reflected in economics portraying humans as economic agents that act individually, rationally, maximising profits or satisfaction (utility), and its prioritisation of market processes above other areas of human provisioning. In this way mainstream economic thinking, for example, exhibits and reinforces a historical and culturally constructed paid and unpaid split in the economic spheres of activity, with women relegated to the unpaid and their contributions largely unrecognised in economic measures, models and policies.<sup>11</sup>

An alternative economic strategy needs to challenge such gendered compartmentalisations and include the outcomes of all the spheres of activities (state, market, household, community, nature) for ensuring the provisioning of human well-being. The lessons learned from COVID-19, including the power of communities coming together to care and support one another, may feel like a thing of the past. But these lessons are a source of alternative ideas for restructuring economies. The UK Women's Budget Group established a Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy that developed a strategy for a caring economy prioritising gender equality, environmental sustainability and human well-being that brings into view different spheres of provisioning and relationships between them (see Figure 12.2).



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**Figure 12.2 A caring economy encompasses gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability<sup>12</sup>**



Australia has some distance to travel in developing an alternative economic framework, although there are some green shoots. Federal Treasury has done work on developing a well-being framework for the budget, as has the Australian Capital Territory government (see Case Studies 9 & 10). Labor Treasurer, Jim Chalmers, has developed a budget narrative that includes the care economy and the Women's Budget Statements identify significant care economy policy allocations. However, there is scant evidence at this stage of an integration of the well-being framework with gender-responsive budgeting (see Case Study 10). Notwithstanding Labor's positive climate change efforts around renewables, there remain huge policy contradictions with fossil fuel subsidies and the weakening of environmental regulations. In the face of global threats, the need for an alternative economic strategy is becoming increasingly urgent to progress gender equality and ensure that no one is left behind.

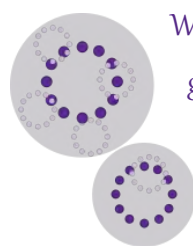
### ***Strengthening democratic participatory processes***

Democratic participation in budget debates and decisions cannot be taken for granted. A range of strategies is needed to facilitate broader participation than is currently the case. As noted above, NFAW proposes that the government holds early consultation with women's organisations to develop budget priorities and bids.<sup>13</sup> Shoring up gender advocates and women in positions of power in the bureaucracy, cabinet and parliament assists in creating a space for gender equality in the budget process. Strategies such as cross-party women's parliamentary caucus can be used to elevate gender equality issues.

Over the last decade women's organisations at the federal level and in Victoria have played an important role in critiquing budgets and advocating for the expansion and deepening of gender-responsive budgeting initiatives. Women arguing and defending gender equality has been patchy in other jurisdictions. Australia's history shows that the lack of engagement from women's organisations undermines progress and the sustainability of gender-responsive budgeting.

Engaging around bold ideas will expose tensions around the meaning of gender and gender equality. It is important to democratically engage with the different and sometimes clashing needs and priorities within the diverse movement for gender equality.

Women's relatively small political influence can be augmented with involvement of those who share a common interest in increasing equality. Alliances need to be formed with other progressive groups concerned with the issues of climate crisis, poverty, workers' rights and human rights. Collaboration among and with researchers is important for effective engagement with the budget.



*Women tend to favour more redistributive fiscal policies and a larger role for government. ... The implication of this finding is that greater agency for women in public life may influence spending and tax decisions, and in particular, may lead to more redistributive spending.*

*Janet Stotsky<sup>14</sup>*

## *Engaging strategically with the state*

The state is central to gender-responsive budgeting delivering on the transformative ambition of gender equality. Feminists need to utilise the state in a positive role in redistributing resources to create a more equal society. However, the economic policies of government historically has not always been beneficial to women so it's important to understand the circumstances under which the state will promote the necessary transformational changes for gender equality.

Effective gender equality interventions by governments require a long-term strategy and a recognition that the mobilisation of enormous political pressure will be required for reforms from progressive organisations outside the state. The pressures applied to the state from large corporations, big tech, oligarchs, and male dominated/patriarchal structures against progressive changes are formidable. Strategies are needed to breakdown the hierarchical and masculine structures of the bureaucracy and to make the state more democratically accountable.

The role of the state has become more complicated with the breakdown of the rules-based international order that emerged after World War II. The mores of the postwar order provided relatively stable relationships between national states for seven decades, the trade-off for stability being that countries were restrained in their pursuit of national policies. The Trump administration, assuming office in 2025, has now opted for freedom of action in national policy with the most visible change being the imposition of tariffs on goods imported to the United States. The Trump administration has jettisoned diversity, equality or inclusion policies, funding and jobs. This has been accompanied by the United States government pressuring for a similar approach in their dealings with Australia and other countries. The changing international economic and political context has the potential to breakdown relationships, trust and national security, and is likely to have significant implications for the role of the state, and its policies and budgets. Australia's navigation of the new circumstances will be critical to whether it maintains the momentum for gender-responsive budgeting and the reduction of inequalities. A public conversation is needed to debate what governments can and will do and what any action means for gender equality.

The way forward for gender-responsive budgeting in Australia is fraught with uncertainty. Historic challenges to gender equality remain intransigent. Even as supporters and advocates succeed in fostering positive change here and there, there will be new challenges that emerge, as always, over time, given the long, long tradition worldwide of gender inequality, along with the rapid pace of societal, technological and economic change.

This casebook provides evidence of the wealth of knowledge, practical experience, and networks that have flourished around gender-responsive budgeting, and presage some of the past and existing challenges. Over the past decades, academics, community groups, women's organisations, politicians, and journalists have come together and made contributions to highlight inequalities, identify policy alternatives and mobilise for reform.



The knowledge and experience accumulated over the past four decades have strengthened gender-responsive budgeting work both inside and outside governments, potentially positioning it to endure hostilities and seize on opportunities to create meaningful and structural changes for gender equality and women's empowerment.

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## Notes, The Way Forward

- <sup>1</sup> Costa, M., & Sharp, R. (2025). *Way forward. Women Count Australia: A Casebook for Gender-Responsive Budgeting*. Adelaide, Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> This section draws on Sharp, R. (2003). [Budgeting for equity: Gender budget initiatives within a framework of performance budgeting](#). UNIFEM, NY, p. 9-19.
- <sup>3</sup> Equal Rights Alliance (ERA) [2021-22 Federal Coalition government's Women's Budget Statement](#) (Instagram 3 June 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with Senator Rosemary Crowley, Parliament of Australia. 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> Johnson, C. (2024). [The politics of gender equality, Australian lessons in an uncertain world](#). *Gender and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan Open Access, p. 252.
- <sup>6</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2003). [Gender equality in Australia, strengthening gender considerations in policy and budget decisions](#). Paris, OECD.
- <sup>7</sup> Marx, U. (2024) Measuring and managing gender equality: The case of gender budgeting in Austria in Bohoslavsky, J.P. & Rulli, M. (Eds), *Feminism in public debt – A human rights approach*. Bristol University Press Digital, p.247-259.
- <sup>8</sup> Richardson, D., & Browne, B. (2018). [The arbitrary 23.9% tax revenue to GDP figure: From a convenient assumption to a 'speed limit'](#). The Australia Institute Briefing Note, Canberra, Australia Institute.
- <sup>9</sup> Greber, J. (2025). *Mirroring Trump, Peter Dutton takes aim at diversity and inclusion workforce*. ABC News. 31 January.
- <sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, Johnson (2024), p. 231-264.
- <sup>11</sup> Ferber, M. A. & Nelson, J. (1993). *Beyond economic man- Feminist theory and economics*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Commission on a Gender Equal Economy. (2020). *Creating a caring economy: A call for action*. London, Women's Budget Group, p. 4.
- <sup>13</sup> National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW). (2022). *Gender lens on the October 2022-23 budget: Gender-focused machinery of government*. NFAW.
- <sup>14</sup> Stotsky, J. (2024). *Budgeting for gender equality: A practical guide to gender budgeting*. Manila, Asian Development Bank, p. 14.