

# Women and Government Budgets

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*In recognition of the significant, but often unknown, impact of government budgets on the role and status of women, both Federal and State Labor government administrations have introduced 'women's budget' statements. It is important to recognise that the political motivation of governments in establishing women's budgets has been primarily political self interest. To some extent, however, the move also reflects the growing economic focus, and power, of the women's movement. This paper examines the content and limitations of women's budget programs.*

What effects do government budgets have on women? By and large this question has, until recently, been of little interest to governments themselves. General economic policies and government programs are usually conceived as beneficial to the entire community. Even policies primarily aimed to benefit a specific group (such as taxation concessions to business) are portrayed as ultimately benefiting all in the community. However, government budgets need to be scrutinised for their distinctive impact on different community groups. A close analysis of the specific impact of government budgets according to sex is particularly important to those of us involved in the struggle for increased sexual equality. Unfortunately, the pattern and impact of the state's taxation and expenditure policies in relation to women has in the past received little attention from governments, from the bureaucracy or from policy analysts.

In recognition of the significant, but often unknown, impact of government budgets on the role and status of women, both Federal and State Labor government administrations have recently introduced programs to investigate this impact. The first women's budget was produced in 1984 by the Federal government. The 'Women's Budget Program' (since renamed the Women's Budget Statement) was tabled as a budget paper in Parliament by the Prime Minister on budget night. It was the first such budgetary exercise in relation to women for any western nation (Summers 1986, p.65). It originated from a recommendation by the Secretaries' Task Force on the Status of Women established by the Hawke Government soon after it came to power. A central figure behind the idea was Anne Summers, Women's Adviser to the Prime Minister. Under her leadership, the

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women's budget was developed and implemented by the Office of Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Subsequently, women's units in the Department of Premier and Cabinet in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria, have also each separately developed and co-ordinated women's budgets.

It is important to recognize that the political motivation of governments in establishing women's budgets has been primarily to publicise their own 'achievements' in relation to women's issues. However, to some extent, it also reflects the growing economic focus, and power of, the women's movement. Direct involvement in policy-making in government had already been established as a distinguishing feature of the Australian women's movement (Franzway 1986, p.45). However, the feminist political impact within the arena of the state has, by and large, been limited to the social and 'welfare' areas. In the period since the election of the Hawke Labor Government, there has developed increased awareness, particularly amongst feminists working within the state bureaucracy, that women cannot afford to allow state policies in key economic areas to remain uncontested. In part, therefore, the introduction of women's budgets also reflects a change of focus and priority by feminists within the state.

### **Women's Budgets**

Women's budgets are not separate budgets for women. They are attempts to breakdown, or disaggregate, the government's mainstream budget according to its impact on women. Participating government departments are required to attempt to identify the impact of their programs and proposed budgets on women. While these assessments are then subjected to varying degrees of editing by the co-ordinating women's units, it is important to recognise that, in the main, the published assessments are the views and assumptions held by government departments themselves.

The formal aims of the women's budget exercise are two-fold. Firstly, it represents an explicit attempt to identify more clearly, and to evaluate, the implications for women of government policies and expenditures. Secondly, in a somewhat more subtle way, it also seeks to influence the quantity and quality of budget allocations made by the various state agencies in relation to women and girls.

Recently, women's budgets have received recognition at the United Nations. In 1987 Australia received an invitation from the United Nations to present a paper to a U.N. Expert Group Seminar on the 'Role of National Machinery for Improving the Status of Women and Promoting Equality'. Women's budgets have therefore effectively become a model at an international level for policymakers engaged in the process of changing the social and economic status of women. However, so far there has been little reflective analysis of their

effectiveness. Our concerns in analysing the women's budget exercises here are, firstly, to ask to what extent they actually succeed in informing us about the role of government budgetary policy in affecting women's economic position and, secondly, whether they themselves can serve as an effective mechanism for progressive change?

### **What have Women's Budgets told us about the Impact of Government Programs on Women?**

Women's budgets have become the most comprehensive existing overview of the mainstream budget's effect upon any single population group. Such a stocktake is an essential first step towards providing a meaningful assessment of the relative resource allocations to women within a given budget. A close study of women's budgets also has the potential to provide an awareness of policy gaps with respect to women. They enable evaluation of the degree of awareness on the part of departments of government policies intended to promote the economic and social position of women and of the extent to which departments are active in their implementation. In short, women's budgets can provide an extensive information base on which to develop further evaluations and strategies for change.

The women's budget analyses recognise that government resource allocations affect women both directly, by design, and indirectly as part of general policies. Women in the community are most directly affected by those government programs which are specifically targeted to them (e.g. women's health centres; T.A.F.E. New Opportunities for Women (NOW) training programs etc). In relation to such targeted expenditures, the most obvious observation to make is that they are very low given the established economic and social disadvantages characterising such a large specific population group. An analysis of the 1985-86 South Australian women's budget reveals that direct government budget allocations to women in the community accounted for an average of only 0.75 of a per cent of the total budgets of the twenty six participating departments (Sharp 1987, p.6). The smallness of these direct allocations can be seen as an indicator of governments' current lack of sensitivity to the special needs of women and girls within their programs. Similarly, the South Australian women's budget indicates that there exist large policy gaps in relation to certain groups of women (e.g. migrant, Aboriginal, elderly, teenage women). There is no doubt that those specifically targeted expenditures which currently do exist can be important in initiating changes to improve women's position even though they are not quantitatively large. However, at this stage women's budgets provide only basic statistical information and very little real evaluation of the effectiveness of specific programs for women.

The impact of indirect, or general, budget allocations on women in the community, because of their sheer size, are potentially the

most significant indicator of the effort and commitment of governments in raising the economic position of women. The South Australian study showed such allocations range from 93-100 per cent of departments' total budgets — with an average of 99.2 per cent for the twenty six participating agencies. Because these allocations constitute the vast majority of each department's expenditure, they are often described as 'mainstream' budget allocations. The information provided by departments about their general programs and expenditures is, therefore, potentially critical in evaluating the role of the state's budgetary processes in reinforcing or changing women's unequal economic position.

Women's budgets do provide a vast amount of general information about the objectives and anticipated outcomes of mainstream budget allocations. Furthermore, their quality has improved with each successive budget. However, these analyses have been characterised by serious problems in adequately disaggregating the budgetary information by sex. Similarly, while information on the impact of budgetary cuts is crucial in assessing the overall change in resource allocation to women it is frequently not included in women's budgets. The savage cuts in 1986-87 to the Human Rights Commission, the body responsible for arbitrating complaints laid under the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act (1984), was not reported in the Federal Women's Budget (Ranald and Burgmann 1987, p.12). Therefore, at this stage women's budgets are more informative in telling us what government agencies do not know about the specific impact of their mainstream programs and budget allocations on women than in providing a detailed assessment of actual impact.

Women's budgets also tell little about the impact of revenue raising activities on women. It was not until the third (1986-87) women's budget that Federal Treasury included some information on taxation. However, the revenue raising activities of governments continue to receive limited coverage and many of the existing assessments are simplistic. For example, the department of Employment, Education and Training in the Federal 1988-89 Women's Budget asserted that there would be a 'significant expansion (of tertiary education enrolments), especially for those traditionally under-represented in higher education' but the 'individual beneficiaries of higher education' would be taxed to finance this expansion (Women's Budget Statement 1988-89, pp.132-33). Despite the department's assurances that the tax has been specifically designed to protect the interests of women and girls it is highly questionable that such a revenue raising policy will actually increase the proportion of women and girls undertaking tertiary education or, just as importantly, improve their participation in awards which will raise their relative earnings.

In addition to policies that directly and indirectly impact on women in the community (referred to above as specifically targeted and general or mainstream budgetary expenditures), some women's budgets

include an assessment of the government's internal programs and resource allocations for the promotion of equal employment opportunity (EEO) for its own women employees. The Federal Women's Budget Statement contains minimal information on the government's own endeavours on EEO for women. This is because the Office of Status of Women believes it is important to avoid any confusion between internal equity programs and an analysis of the impact of government programs on women in the community. Moreover, EEO programs are generally targeted at four groups, not just women, and EEO expenditure is not disaggregated by target groups.

However, employment inequalities between female and male public servants are significant. The 1988/89 Federal Women's Budget Statement reveals that 60 per cent of permanent women compared to 27 per cent of permanent men in the Public Service were on salaries of less than \$21,793. The various State government women's budget exercises which do include internal budget allocations to EEO activities provide some insights into the overall progress of the Australian state as an employer. Overall, expenditure on EEO was minute. The South Australian study showed such expenditure to account for an average of only 0.1 of a per cent of departments' total budgets. Some departments revealed an appalling lack of understanding of the concept of EEO. For example, one department included its total salary expenditure on females employed in the department as part of its EEO expenditures for women. The women's budget effectively demonstrated that the South Australian government had not allocated large amounts to its own EEO programs, nor have the majority of individual departments developed a genuine commitment towards, or even understanding of, these programs.

### **Why do Women's Budgets tell us so little about the Impact of Government Programs on Women?**

There are several significant obstacles to women's budgets being able to provide a reliable assessment of the impact of their activities and budget allocations on women. One of the major problems is undoubtedly a certain lack of commitment within the bureaucracy to achieving the aims of the operation. In particular, there is resistance within the various Treasury departments to the women's budget being part of the government's overall budgetary process. Some senior management and ministers do not give it the commitment in practice which is necessary to improve their department's assessments of the impact of their programs on women. Underlying these problems, of course, is a lack of data and resources available to undertake program assessments. However, a number of further significant problems also need to be recognised:

- the political constraints imposed by governments on public self criticism within the state system;

- the limitations of the existing budgetary process itself;
- the extent to which departmental assessments are limited by gender-biased theoretical assumptions;
- the failure to disaggregate budgetary information by sex.

### *Political Constraints*

Apart from the issue of the degree of political commitment of individual ministers and senior management to raising women's economic and social status, an internal evaluative process like the women's budget (which is intended to become a public document) invariably comes under pressures to be tempered somewhat in its criticism of the government. The various women's budget documents do contain a great deal of information which reveals the inadequacies of existing government policies for women. However, the appropriate critical conclusions are rarely drawn out, either by the departments themselves or by the co-ordinating women's unit. This undoubtedly reflects the somewhat marginalised position of the women's units and the pressures they are under not to rock the boat. On the other hand, the women bureaucrats involved are often quite adept at allowing departments to damn themselves with their own words!

While accountability for department's assessments has been established at high levels (in 1987-88 Secretary and Ministerial clearance was introduced as a requirement at the federal level), women's units responsible for co-ordinating women's budgets frequently have difficulty in obtaining important information about last minute budgetary decisions. Moreover, ministerial and senior management accountability, while crucial, can invite a sanitisation of departmental assessments.

### *Limitations of the Budget*

The mainstream budget process itself provides a very limited framework within which a genuine assessment of the impact of expenditures can be developed. The budget is merely a statement of a government's estimated revenues and expenditures for the year. It allocates resources on a short term basis without the requisite assessment or evaluation which is necessary to achieve longer term goals such as the promotion of sexually more equal society. As a result, there is some tension between women's budgets and the mainstream budget. Women's budgets seek to impose a new process which Treasury departments tend to see as incompatible with mainstream budget processes and goals.

Moreover, in the main, the budget allocates funds according to general programs which are rarely directed towards specific community groups. This structural format is itself a major constraint on the budget's ability to yield information about resource allocations to any specific group such as women. However, a major change in the past decade has been the shift from 'line functional' budgets to

'program performance' budgeting. The latter allows a more readily available analysis of government performance in relation to its objectives. The promotion of a more evaluative and accountable methodology in general budgetary processes is very important to the future effectiveness of the women's budget strategy.

### *Gender-biased Assumptions*

There are many examples of statements from the Federal government's Women's Budget statements which illustrate the tendentious nature of traditional policy assumptions about the impact of government programs on women. For example, it is argued in the 1988/89 document's overview that the most effective approach to overcoming women's poverty is the development of a macroeconomic economic strategy aimed at restoring economic growth. Specific reforms aimed at progressive economic redistribution in favour of economically disadvantaged groups need to be put aside while the government restores the ailing economy to health. Such a view assumes that there will occur a 'trickle-down' beneficial effect from the income-producing activities of the private sector to those without paid employment and in low paid jobs. This theory is highly questionable and is subject to criticism — even from orthodox economists. Any restoration of economic growth in the macroeconomy which does not specifically include strategies for redistributing resources will be likely to exacerbate existing inequalities.

Similarly, feminist analyses have drawn attention to the assumption of women's economic dependency underlying policies such as the dependant spouse taxation rebate and the vast majority of social security programs. Within the women's budget assessments provided by Federal Treasury and the Department of Social Security, women's dependency was simply assumed without question. This assumption has been well illustrated by Margaret Power and her colleagues:

The idea of men as breadwinners and women as economic dependents is built into the tax system. It is explicit in the dependent spouse rebate. The Treasury tells us that ninety seven per cent of claims for this rebate are made by men. But the Treasury fails to point out that while married men get this tax bonus, now worth nearly \$16 a week, if they have a dependent spouse, the rebate has a negative effect on married women's work incentives. (Power et.al. 1988, p. 21. See also Sawer 1986, p.22).

However, by far the most pervasive assumption undermining the quality of departments' assessments of the impact of their budget allocations is that of 'gender neutrality'. If the number of times it was asserted was any test, no-one would doubt the various departments' commitment to making their programs and budget allocations 'gender neutral'. There is a vast difference, however, between designing policies and programs without intentionally favouring one sex and actually achieving an equal outcome for both women and men. As women and men occupy different economic and social

positions, the application of the same rules and procedures will tend to reinforce existing inequalities between the sexes.

Therefore, in practice, departments' notion of gender neutrality has been used simply as a justification for policies which did not recognise the different, and often disadvantaged, position of women. Several departments simply assumed that the impact of their programs would be 'gender neutral' even in circumstances where the unequal position of women has been very well established. For example, the Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce asserted in its 1985/86 submission that its own programs in the area of industry, technology and small business are likely to 'impact equally on women and men'. Since Australia has one of the highest levels of labour market sex segmentation in the OECD and the department's programs made no attempt to ensure that women's areas of employment were equally catered for, it is highly unlikely that such programs would have, by chance, equally benefitted women.

At times, departments have pursued a quite aggressive commitment to not recognising the special position of women in the economy. There frequently occurred statements along the lines that to incorporate the concerns of women into programs, or to target them in any way, was against departmental policy. The Federal Department of Science and Technology illustrated these views when it argued that its policy and program initiatives 'exist for the benefit of the entire Australian community'. However, 'in promoting the development of a national technological capability and the application of technology the department does not seek to influence programs to have a positive impact on a particular sector of the community' (Women's Budget Program, 1984/85, p.48). Similarly, the Department of Finance was at pains to point out that while women would benefit, along with everyone, from the department's introduction of Program Performance Budgeting, it was not intended that this program would 'have a specific (beneficial) impact on women' (Women's Budget Program, 1986/87, p.124).

### *Aggregative Analysis*

A distinguishing feature of women's budgets is their promotion of a disaggregated view of the impact of a government's budget and policies. That is, an analysis which seeks to identify the different impact of the budget on different social groups. Women's budgets have met strong resistance within state and federal bureaucracies because of this.

Traditionally, government budgets and policies have been based upon highly aggregative methods of analysis. That is, government policies are usually assumed to affect everyone, more or less, equally. They are assumed to serve the 'public interest' and to meet the needs of the 'general person'. However, such a methodology works against the interests of women and other disadvantaged groups. This is because



their own specific position, and consequent needs, are lost in aggregative analyses. Those who adopt the aggregative methodology are able to conclude that the 'public interest' can be served even though some groups, usually referred to as 'minority groups', within the community are disadvantaged. The lack of interest amongst many bureaucrats and politicians about the impact of general policies on specific groups contributes further to perpetuating their dearly-held view that budgets, and the programs they finance, are 'gender neutral' in their impact.

Departments with economic portfolios tended to be particularly dogmatic in asserting the appropriateness of aggregative analysis. In the 1985/86 Federal Women's Budget, Treasury argued that its programs were aimed at the management of the macroeconomy and, therefore, their impact on any particular group cannot be assessed! The following year, however, Treasury admitted that it does not have the methodology to determine the relative impact of macroeconomic decisions on women as a specific group. Orthodox economic analysis is highly aggregative in its methodology (Sharp and Broomhill 1988, Chapter 2). Hence, it is hardly a surprise that Treasury finds an exercise which demands a disaggregated methodology beyond its capability.

### **A Strategy for Change?**

Women's budgets have the potential to achieve three main aims. These are:

- to raise awareness within government agencies about the significance of their budgets for women;
- to serve as a mechanism for activists and women in the community to gain knowledge about the equity and effectiveness of government policies and programs;
- to increase the equity and the effectiveness of resources allocated to women by governments.

They have the potential to assist feminist strategies at two levels. Firstly, they can provide an umbrella for feminists working within the state to develop a co-ordinated strategy for change. Secondly, they can also be used by feminists working outside the state to pressure for change. If women's budgets provided such a means by which feminists could contest the state and achieve all three potential aims then they would be a powerful mechanism for positive change.

#### *Awareness Raising within the Government?*

The most noticeable achievement of women's budgets has been to raise awareness within government agencies about the significance of their policies, programs and budget allocations for women. This has been primarily evidenced by progressive improvements in departmental assessments with each budget. The Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs is illustrative. In the first women's budget,

Aboriginal Affairs argued that its programs 'have been directed to the benefit of Aboriginal communities in toto, without any specific preference being given to sub-groups of these communities' (Women's Budget Program 1984-85, p.22). By the fifth women's budget, the department's tone had changed considerably: 'Greater emphasis is now being placed on the impact of programs on women. In 1987-88 \$900,000 was directed towards a new Women's Initiatives Program . . . In other areas the portfolio has shown increased sensitivity to women's issues . . . Strategies for the collection of gender specific data to measure the impact of Departmental programs on women are now being developed' (Women's Budget Statement 1988-89, pp.154-55). The department also had a five-fold increase in its number of pages detailing the implications of its programs for Aboriginal women. Undoubtedly, of course, the Women's Budget Program itself was not the only progressive influence at work. However, there is no doubt that it had some progressive impact.

However, the quality of departmental assessments of the impact of their programs and budgets on women have been variable. The economic portfolio areas, in particular, revealed a low level of sensitivity to women's specific economic position and indicated little commitment to incorporating women's interests in their programs. As we have already argued, the limited understanding by economic portfolios of the significance of their activities for women, and the consequent lack of concern to mainstream women's issues throughout their programs, is fostered by many unquestioned, and false, assumptions held in relation to women as well as by their highly aggregative methods of analysis. In the long term, women's budgets undoubtedly do provide a mechanism for challenging these obstacles — but progress has been limited so far.

One of the further potential benefits of women's budgets has been to provide a process whereby 'femocrats' working within the state could co-ordinate their activities and demands for more effective and equitable programs for women. This process has certainly begun to occur — but not, as yet, to any great extent. One example of how the women's budget provided a stimulus for increasing the effectiveness of feminist strategies within government is use which has been made by various women's units of 'indicators' developed from the South Australian Women's Budget. These indicators allowed departments' performances to be ranked according to achievements in areas such as the quantity of resources specifically targeted to women for EEO. They were thereby instrumental in increasing the leverage available to femocrats to push for change within their own departments.

#### *A Mechanism for Activists?*

So far, there is very little evidence that the information and opportunities provided by women's budgets have been utilised by feminists outside the state. This is unfortunate since ultimately the

ability of the women's budgets to affect change is dependent upon significant pressure being applied upon governments from external as well as internal sources.

The potential use of women's budgets by activists would be greatly enhanced if the women's units co-ordinating the exercise could make a more concerted attempt to disseminate the valuable information contained in these budgets to the community. There is a need for the potential usefulness of the budget for feminists to be drawn to the attention of women in welfare groups, trade unions and others in the community. Stronger support for the women's budget strategy from outside the bureaucracy would provide a much needed mandate for maintaining and extending the scope of the budgets. It would also greatly strengthen the hand of the women within the bureaucracy seeking to pressure departments to perform on women's issues. On a broader level, increased outside awareness and pressure could work to put more pressure on governments to have to identify more convincingly exactly how their broad macroeconomic policies are going to affect women.

However, as they currently are constructed, women's budgets remain limited in their ability to provide all the information required to permit a meaningful assessment of the impact of government policies and expenditures upon women. They are particularly limited in their ability to provide quantifiable measures of improvements over time.

An innovative approach to solving this problem has been provided by the 1989/90 South Australian Women's Budget under the guidance of Carol Treloar and Lesley Dormer. In an attempt to be more analytical about the extent of change achieved in women's economic and social position as a result of government programs, departments were asked to provide their own internal indicators of progressive changes. They were also asked to detail the expected future outcomes of current expenditures. This format represents by far the most explicit attempt to link official policy with effective resource allocations and actual outcomes. The result of the introduction of this system of performance indicators has been the achievement of a substantial improvement in the level of gender awareness in the information and assessments provided by departments for the 1989/90 Budget. The establishment of such systems of increased accountability needs to be strongly supported from both inside and outside the state bureaucracies.

### *Increasing Government Resources?*

At this stage there is no clear evidence whether women's budgets have had a marked impact on the mainstream budgetary process or increased the amount of resources specifically allocated to women by governments. This is because they do not provide a complete picture of how women fare in relation to any particular budget or over a period of time. An accurate evaluation of the change in resources allocated to women would require information on both revenue and

expenditure changes and cross-sectorial information to discern the implications of the overall impact of the budget for women's work, education and training incentives, poverty traps and women's status and economic independence within the family (Office of the Status of Women 1987, p.3).

However, this does not deny that there have been achievements. In the first instance they have provided a means whereby women's units can be forewarned of proposed cuts in areas of importance to women — thus enabling them to successfully fight against the occurrence of many draconian budget cuts. In periods of restrictionist budgetary policies the importance of such an achievement of Women's Budgets should not be under-rated. Moreover, some women's budgets have more overtly sought to influence budgetary outcomes or have been more fully integrated into the budget process than others. The New South Wales women's budget, under the directorship of Helen L'Orange, has been the most directly aimed at increasing the amount of budget allocations to women. The South Australian Women's Budget has gone furthest towards the development of a more evaluative assessment of overall government progress over a number of budgets. (S.A. Women's Budget 1989/90).

## Conclusion

The longer term significance of women's budgets needs to be assessed in the context of the overall role of the state in relation to women's economic position. Historically, the role of the state in influencing women's economic position in society has been complex and, in some respects contradictory. While it is clear that the various agencies of the capitalist state, and the government in particular, have played an important role in sustaining the structures within which women are subordinated in society, the state has also acted as an agent for progressive changes to improve women's economic position.

Women's budgets themselves reflect this contradiction. On the one hand, their existence illustrates that pressure from women within the political process has been successful in forcing governments at least to acknowledge women's specific economic interests. This is an important step and its significance should not be underestimated. On the other hand, in practice, the potentially progressive role of women's budgets envisaged by their architects remains only partially fulfilled as a result of other conservative pressures placed upon the state.

Invariably, the state has come under pressure from powerful external patriarchal forces and financial vested interests to resist the sort of structural, budgetary and policy changes required to make substantive improvements to women's position through state intervention. The internal structures of the state are similarly shaped by conservative patriarchal and capitalist forces. Women's budgets have been developed within the framework of a very narrow budgetary process,

a gender-blind set of policymaking assumptions and a strong ideological bias against state intervention to achieve equity goals for specific groups.

Consequently, the establishment of women's budgets as part of the state's budgetary process is only a first step. To make them more effective, considerably more pressure will need to be exerted upon the state from outside. Women's groups, progressive community organisations and trade unions will all need to be mobilised to demand more concrete evidence from governments of progress in improving women's position. It is at this point that the machinery established by women's budgets is likely to be effective. They potentially offer a mechanism by which progressive policies can be initiated, evaluated and rewarded within the agencies of the state. This will only happen, however, to the extent that the state itself is under pressure to act progressively. Ultimately, achieving economic equality for women is a political rather than an administrative process.

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