

Strengthening gender equality and women empowerment through gender-responsive budgeting in the public sector

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a proliferation of gendered tensions in general and gender-based violence, in particular. As there is a well-established link between gender equality and improved economic efficiency and productivity, the South African government has committed itself to address gender inequality. However, whether these commitments are translated into reality is not clear. In this regard, the Commission assessed the effectiveness of critical departmental budgets in addressing gender equality. The research findings showed that, although various pieces of legislation, policies and institutional frameworks are in place, evidence on the ground shows that public-sector budgeting processes remain weak on mainstreaming women empowerment and gender equality issues. To this effect, the Commission made several recommendations on how the budgets of national departments can be repositioned to effectively address gender inequalities.

Background

Poverty, inequality and unemployment are gendered in South Africa. Some 52% of poor households are made up of women. The median income for women is 76% that of men (Stats SA, 2018). In 2009, 2011 and 2015, it was shown that male-headed households had greater access than female-headed households to basic services and household assets, including running water, electricity, formal dwellings, flushing toilets, washing machines, computers and internet access, illustrating the gendered nature of social inequality (Stats SA, 2018). Female-headed households also disproportionately experience persistent levels of poverty compared to male-headed households (Zizzamia, Schotte & Leibbrandt, 2019; Stats SA, 2018).



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The vision of the Commission is to provide influential advice for equitable, efficient and sustainable intergovernmental fiscal relations between national, provincial and local spheres of government. This relates to the equitable division of government revenue among three spheres of government and to the related service delivery of public services to South Africans.

Through focused research, the Commission aims to provide proactive, expert and independent advice on promoting the intergovernmental fiscal relations system using evidence-based policy analysis to ensure the realisation of constitutional values. The Commission reports directly to both Parliament and the provincial legislatures, who hold government institutions to account. Government must respond to the Commission's recommendations and the extent to which they will be implemented at the tabling of the annual national budget in February each year.

The Commission consists of commissioners appointed by the President: the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, three representatives of provinces, two representatives of organised local government and two other persons. The Commission pledges its commitment to the betterment of South Africa and South Africans in the execution of its duties.

Evidence indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened gender inequality (UN Women and UNFPA, 2021). The percentage of women living in extreme poverty increased from 13% in 2019 to 14% in 2020 due to the pandemic, while the percentage of men living in extreme poverty increased from 10.5% in 2019 to 11% in 2020 (UN Women and UNFPA, 2021).

One of the avenues adopted globally to turn gender equality commitments into reality has been the budget, specifically so-called gender-responsive budgeting (GRB). GRB seeks to generally improve budgets, while using budgets to promote gender equality and women's empowerment by systematically integrating GRB into service delivery programme planning, budget processes and programme implementation. GRB is not intended to be a separate budget for women or men, but rather a framework that integrates women's empowerment into the budget process (Stotksy, 2016).

In South Africa, commitments have been made to use the budget to address gender inequalities. However, there has been no concrete and systematic analysis of whether budget processes have been effectively utilised to address gender equality. There has been limited scrutiny of the effectiveness of budgeting processes to address gender disparities. This is particularly the case for departmental budgets. As elsewhere in the world, departments' budgets can be used as a catalyst to translate governments' gender equality commitments. In its 2022/23 annual Submission for the Division of Revenue, the Commission evaluated the effectiveness of departmental budgets in fulfilling government's commitments to gender equality. This research also reflected on relevant pieces of legislation and policies around gender inequality. This research used a combination of methods. Case studies were examined of the budgets of five departments: the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the Department of Health (DoH), the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD) and the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DJ&CD), as well as one constitutional institution, the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE). This was supported by a review of international literature, and relevant legislation and policies. Thus, the purpose of this policy brief is to summarise the Commission's research on the effectiveness of critical departmental budgets in addressing gender equality commitments, as well as the adequacy of the legislative, policy and institutional frameworks towards promoting GRB in government.

Research findings

A budget analysis of the case studies of the five national departments and one constitutional institution was conducted so as to examine the effectiveness of government expenditure in translating gender equality commitments. The study revealed four crucial issues about government budgets and gender issues.

1. Limited mainstreaming of gender issues

Firstly, there is limited mainstreaming of gender issues in departmental budgeting processes. The main reason for this is that departments generally lack gender-disaggregated data and information to enable the implementation of gender-responsive planning, followed by budgeting, monitoring, evaluation and auditing. The lack of gender-disaggregated data hinders the effective translation of gender commitments into budgetary allocations. GRB is difficult, if not impossible, to undertake without an institutional plan to effect the engendering of service delivery programmes supported by gender-disaggregated information.

2. Limited gender-disaggregated data

Secondly, the analysis indicated that gender-disaggregated information could be found in other domains or within the knowledge base of departments, but such information is seldom integrated into departments' strategic documents to allow GRB processes. For instance, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) and the CGE generate reports with gender-disaggregated data, which could be helpful to various departments, but departmental systems are not sufficiently mature to integrate such data.

3. Lack of detailed departmental gender performance indicators

Thirdly, the departmental performance indicators are not sufficiently detailed in providing data on the number of women and girls who benefit from their programmes. The DoH, for example, uses various indicators to monitor the progress of its programmes. However, these indicators, except for programmes explicitly focused on women, cannot be used to determine who benefits from the budget in terms of women and men. Similarly, the programmes in the DBE's annual reports and annual performance plans have defined indicators with set targets, but such indicators are not disaggregated to enable a determination of the beneficiaries of these services and facilities in terms of gender. The DWYPD is at the heart of coordinating gender equality efforts in the country. It has various indicators related to each programme and targets set, such as the number of reports produced on interventions and economic opportunities for women and the number of programmes conducted. The Department is expected to take the lead in coordinating the implementation of government's gender equality commitments, including through initiatives such as GRB.

4. Assessing the legislative, policy and institutional framework on GRB

The South African Parliament has passed various pieces of key legislation that further the goals of gender equality and women's interests. These include the Employment Equity Act (1998), the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) (2000), the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill (2013) and the Framework on Gender-responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing (GRPBMEA) (2018). Notwithstanding the progress made with legislation, policies, commitments and obligations, there is limited evidence towards gender mainstreaming across the country (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2020). Gender equality and women's empowerment are often an afterthought or relegated to a sector or specific outcome rather than an integral component across all government sectors. Oversight on gender equality and women empowerment also tends to be limited to the Portfolio Committee on Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, yet it should be cutting across all committees (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2020). The CGE is mandated to promote gender equality and advance the protection, development and attainment of gender equality in South Africa. However, the CGE's budget is mainly consumed by the compensation of employees, and the risk of such a high compensation of employees' budget is that it may crowd out other important priorities and the mandate of the Commission.

Concluding remarks

South Africa has committed itself to addressing gender inequality, partly through GRB. However, evidence on the ground shows that, in the public sector, GRB remains very weak. Many reasons account for this. All the departments analysed have indicators in place to measure the performance of their programmes. However, the indicators are not detailed or gender-disaggregated, making it difficult to assess their budgets on men and women, as their impacts are not gender-neutral.

The Commission highlights the need to invest in collecting gendered data and put robust mechanisms and systems in place to integrate gender information in strategic government documents. This will enable departments to plan, implement, monitor, evaluate and audit budgets through gendered lenses. The collection of such data should not be an end in itself. There is a need to train the executive and management leadership in the broader public sector on gender-responsive planning and budgeting in general. In addition, targeted training and awareness interventions are required for budget officers to use gender-disaggregated data in the budget process. Ideally, the DWYPD should champion and coordinate the collection of gender-disaggregated data, training interventions required at all levels, developing awareness messages, and rolling out gender budgeting campaigns. The refining of gender-based performance indicators and targets will enable the introduction of gender audits. The inclusion of specific gender-based performance indicators and targets in departments' strategic and annual performance plans could form the basis for extending the scope of general audits to include a gender element. An independent body should perform gender budget auditing to objectively analyse whether gender equality has been attained in the budgets allocated.

For gender goals to be realised, the international literature reviewed revealed that various reforms would be needed, including the national government, through the Ministry of Finance, the DWYPD and the Department of Performance Management and Evaluation (DPME) taking the lead in GRB. The Ministry of Finance should be involved in gender budgeting processes through the distribution and allocation of resources. The DWYPD and the DPME should coordinate the entire government machinery in advancing GRB by defining norms and standards for gender-specific performance indicators and targets and performance requirements. GRB institutionalisation should be prioritised and made part of the finance management reforms to support the equitable institutionalisation of the gender budget in planning and processes. The budget process should start with Medium-term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) guidelines that are gender-sensitive. The gender budget reports should contain gender performance and gender impact indicators of all government programmes. In addition, gender-oriented goals should form part of the medium-term expenditure plans as gender equality is a long-term goal that cannot be achieved in a short period.

The Commission makes the following recommendations:

1. The DWYPD and the DPME should finalise the institutionalisation of gender-responsive planning throughout national and provincial government as envisaged by the GRPBMEA.
2. National Treasury, together with the DWYPD and the DPME, should spearhead the implementation of GRB and mainstreaming GRB throughout the entire scope of the budget process as it applies to the national and provincial government. In collaboration with the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, GRB implementation and mainstreaming should be extended to the local government sector.
3. National Treasury should create an enabling environment to institutionalise the GRPBMEA. This may include developing an overall budget framework for the model to be implemented across the budget cycle and MTEF processes, including the revision of the format of Estimates of National Expenditure to give specific expression to the advancement of gender equality.
4. National Treasury and the DWYPD should consider the introduction of a formal gender auditing process to be conducted by a relevant independent institution in respect of the non-financial performance information of departments, entities and municipalities.
5. The DWYPD should coordinate and spearhead initiatives focused on the capacity building of political and administrative leadership on gender-responsive planning, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation and auditing at all levels of government. Such initiatives are to include the training of budget officers on GRB and the use of gender-disaggregated data in the budget process.
6. The DWYPD should, on an annual basis, prepare a comprehensive report on how the Division of Revenue Bill responds to gender inequality and how fiscal policies translate government's gender equality commitments. The report should be tabled for consideration by the relevant committees of Parliament.
7. The DWYPD, together with Statistics South Africa, should provide explicit guidelines for collecting and integrating gender-disaggregated data to ensure the visibility of girls and women in government programme execution and in budgeting processes within government. The Department should also invest in statistical capacity-building in government to improve the measurement of gender equality indicators and the collection of gender-disaggregated data.

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