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## **STUDENT ESSAY**

### **Union Budget 2023-2024: A Gender Analysis<sup>1</sup>**



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The Union Budget of India keeps the brief about the government's finances for the fiscal year that starts from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April to the 31<sup>st</sup> of March and is presented in the parliament by the finance minister. The Union Budget is divided into two parts: The Revenue budget, which consists of revenue receipts and expenditure, and the Capital Budget, which consists of the government's capital receipts and payments. India's Budget for the year 2023-24 has been presented by Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2023.

Amrit Kaal, a term first used by PM Narendra Modi in 2021 to provide a roadmap for India. This year, the budget has clearly demarcated priorities in seven specific areas known as the 'Saptarishi', which include: 1) Inclusive Development 2) Reaching the Last Mile 3) Infrastructure and Investment 4) Unleashing the Potential 5) Green Growth 6) Youth Power 7) Financial Sector. The major allocations to the Ministries include 5.94 Lac Crores to the Ministry of Defence, 2.70 Lakh Crores to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, 2.41 lakh crore to the Ministry of Railways; 2.06 lakh crore to the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food Production, and Distribution; 1.96 lakh crores to Ministry of Home Affairs. While this year's revision of the tax regime caught ample attention, arguably catering to the middle-class interest, its gender aspect seeks a closer look.

#### **Gender and Union Budget 2023 -24**

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written as part of the first internal assessment for the project course on *Government Budgeting: Impact on Public Affairs*.

Gender Budgeting aims at gender mainstreaming through fiscal policies intending to reduce the gender gap. Though significant efforts are made, India largely lacks Gender Responsive Budgeting. Part A of the Gender Budget includes schemes fully dedicated to women, whereas Part B consists of policy schemes that reserve 30 per cent of the funds for women.

In the year 2023-24 Union Budget, the gender budget has been allocated 2.23 lakh crores, accounting for about 5 per cent of the total expenditure. Even though on the surface this may look satisfactory, in terms of increase in allocations, it is merely a 2.12 per cent increase as compared to the 2022-23 Budget. Regarding the expenditure proportion, as compared to last year Union budget, it is only a 0.63 per cent hike. Despite the minimal increase in allocation, relatively speaking, this is not proportionate to India's gender-based needs. Thus, it is important to identify that fiscal remedy alone is not enough when it comes to addressing the socio-economic and structural needs stemming from gender.

It is worth highlighting that the process of the selection of schemes for gender budget remains imprecise. For example, the maiden Mahila Samman Saving Certificate scheme, valid for two years, enabling women to deposit up to two lakhs for two years with an interest rate of 7.5 per cent, is oblivious to a significant structural factor. The majority of Indian women with little to no control over finances are either unable to access the benefits of the scheme or its benefits are subject to patriarchal control by the male members of the family. Additionally, the well-known Jal Jeevan Mission, which ensures the provision of tap water to all rural households, lacks a gender mainstreaming approach with no gender-responsive allocation being made. In India, women walk long distances in rural areas to fetch water and inclusive accessibility to tap water can potentially enhance their quality of life.

The gender budget of India includes schemes like Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan; the National Health Program, the National Urban Health Mission, the Samagra Shiksha Scheme; the Samarthya Scheme, and the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). These schemes add up to almost 45000 Crores. Out of which, while 5000 crores have been allocated to SBM for the construction of toilets and proper sanitation facilities, it fails to address the dearth of hygienic and gender-inclusive public toilets along the major highways of the country. Apart from a few petrol pumps and restaurants along the way, public toilets for women during long journeys remain largely inaccessible. While one may argue this to be an infrastructural impediment across genders, the nuisance of public urination among men is not unknown.

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin encompasses the Part B of the gender budget as an example of gender mainstreaming in the government's housing policy. The scheme aims at making women more

self-reliant by providing houses in their names and supporting them in an effort to uplift women. While this shows a ray of hope, despite 54% of participants in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment (MGNREGA) beneficiaries being women, gender-based allocations for the scheme have been cut from INR. 73,000 crores to INR. 60,000 crores. Moreover, the schemes related to Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) are not gender inclusive in nature. With an allocation of 22,138 crores towards the Ministry of MSMEs, it becomes crucial to take into consideration that, in a patriarchal society like India, women face larger barriers towards becoming entrepreneurs and starting their businesses. Hence, allocations should have been made with respect to the needs of women to encourage entrepreneurial initiatives among them. Additionally, the concern of intersectionality comes into play. For instance, availing of these scheme-based benefits is relatively easier for women belonging to the upper caste as compared to the marginalised castes. This also calls for more decentralization to be effectively implemented at the grassroots levels.

While the Union Budget tries to work towards setting up surveillance cameras, better transport facilities, the establishment of 150 women's colleges to encourage higher education accessibility, 100 women hostels in universities etc. highlighting gender-based considerations in budgeting, the approach remains paternalistic. It is also worth noticing that the ambit of 'Gender' not only calls for the needs of women but also other sexual minorities including transgenders. Yet, India's budget has confined itself to only considering women's needs by erecting merely protective measures. In fact, clubbing women's and children's needs together prioritises women's maternal needs instead of considering women as individuals. It holistically fails to address the specific structural barriers faced particularly by women. Most importantly, having a gender budget on paper is not equivalent to effective implementation and therefore, a comprehensive gender-responsive budget is the need of the hour.

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