

# Gender-sensitive budgets can help end inequality

Mkhululi Ncube 07 Sep 2018

The government is committed to eliminating gender inequality through various policy and legislative interventions. It has also demonstrated its commitment by being a signatory to international conventions, protocols and frameworks, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite this, gender inequality remains high. Women and girls continue to be marginalised and disempowered.

Poverty in South Africa is also gendered. It has been estimated that poverty in woman-headed households is at 50%, compared with 31.4% in male-headed households. The unemployment rate for young women (15 to 24 years) is 10% higher than that for young men. The gender pay gap is between 15% to 17%.

It is possible to change this, and the government is best placed to deal with it. It has the means and levers to effect change. But one of the single most important ways it can turn the situation around is through the budget.

The government is the single biggest spender in the country and all three spheres of government (national, provincial and municipal) taken together can make a big difference if they adopt budgets that translate gender equality commitments into reality.

Gender-responsive budgeting is not a new concept in South Africa but it has gradually lost momentum, especially at national level, where

commitments to introduce such budgets were made about 20 years ago. At subnational levels, the practice of gender-sensitive budgeting is low or nonexistent.

Gender-responsive budgeting uses fiscal instruments to address gender inequalities. Its objective is not to formulate a separate budget for women, but to promote budgetary processes that respond to the different needs of men, women, boys and girls.

Gender-responsive budgeting is different from, but a critical component of, gender mainstreaming. It recognises that traditional budgeting systems are fundamentally patriarchal and fail to recognise the contribution of women to the national fiscus, such as the fact that women are primary caregivers.

It is an innovative strategy for achieving gender equality more quickly as it makes the fiscal space more democratic. Budgets should not be used to perpetuate gender disparities but should, ideally, consider that men and women have different roles and responsibilities in society.

In a multi-order government system, the national government should guide subnational governments on gender-sensitive budgeting. National departments should build an intergovernmental fiscal system that is sensitive to the needs of women and girls, or a system that helps women and girls to escape poverty.

In undertaking oversight on subnational budgets, national departments should assess the budgets of the latter through gender lenses. Having noted the significant role of upper spheres of government in designing gender-inclusive policies, it is important to underscore the point that gender budget initiatives are needed most at municipal level, where gender disparities in basic rights are the most glaring.

The proximity of subnational governments to the people means they have the greatest responsibility to respond more directly to women's and men's needs. Lower orders of government should be clear on how their gender commitments are translated into fiscal commitments.

Experiences from elsewhere and from literature suggest that successful gender-responsive budget implementation requires the following:

- The involvement of a broader spectrum of actors, including nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), academics, civil society and parliamentarians, and empowering these with skills to hold the government accountable on the gender sensitivity of their budgets;
- Building capacity of budget officers, parliamentarians and civil society on gender mainstreaming in policy and development plans, for successful gender budgeting.
- Building strong alliances among key stakeholders, such as Parliament, NGOs, civil society, academics and media, in order to sustain the momentum on gender budgeting. The involvement of non-state parties ensures that the momentum can be sustained even if there are changes in government or ideology;
- Having adequate sex-disaggregated data; and
- Political will and political leadership.

All spheres of government should use their potent lever, the budget, to effectively change the situation of women. As the single biggest spender in the country, the government should spend appropriately and use its budgets to move women and girls out of poverty.

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