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Union Budget 2015-16 fails to provide for the needs of the women in the country, with budgetary allocation for most women’s development schemes facing a steep reduction. This article reviews the budget through a gender lens and finds the vision for inclusivity sorely lacking. Allocations for mid-day meals, integrated child development schemes, girl child education, and women’s safety, among others have been critically under-funded in the current Budget.

The Union Budget (2015-16) has subsidised the corporate sector by providing the tax reductions and sops. The wealth tax (replaced by a 2 per cent surcharge) and the phased reduction of corporate tax have made the richer sections of the economy jubilant. The burden of indirect taxes is going to break the back of poor women. The macroeconomic measures proposed in the budget are detrimental to the working class and marginalised sections of the economy. With respect to allocations for social sector, paralysis has been generated by neo-liberal analysis. Instead of raising the direct taxes from rich sections to fund the Railway budget, public-private partnership (PPP) model is promoted to further the cause of corporatisation of transport and make the masses pay more for transport services. The budget has demanded the diversion of pension funds and MP Local area Development (MPLAD) funds, thereby absolving the government from any direct responsibility to enhance financial support for regional development and pensioners. By reducing financial allocation for Panchayati Raj, the Union Budget makes a mockery of democratic decentralisation in the absence of financial decentralisation, the local self-government bodies become ineffective and the talk of 50 per cent reserved seats for women in the rural and urban local self government bodies becomes an empty rhetoric of ‘empowerment of women’.

Public Economics with No Concern for the Marginalised Groups

The state is increasingly withdrawing from the social sector in which the financial allocation has been reduced to from 16.3 per cent 2014-2015 (budget estimates) and 15.06 per cent revised estimates, 2014-15 to 13.7 per cent of the current budget outlay for 2015-2016. Financial allocation for women’s needs gets reduced in the current budget as the percentage of allocation for women and child development remains stagnant at 0.01 per cent of the total budget. This budget fails to translate gender commitments of the government into budgetary commitments as the financial provisions for gender concerns have reduced from 4.19 per cent of the estimated total budgetary expenditure in 2014-2015 to 3.71 per cent of the total expenditure in the current budget.

Gender Budgeting

Women’s organisations have been demanding universal social security coverage for all women workers. But there is no special focus on the needs of working women, especially in the
unorganised sector, in this budget. In the Union Budget 2015-16, there has been nearly 50 per cent decrease in the allocation of the Ministry of Women and Child Development over the revised budget of 2014-15. Even if we add the Rs. 1000 crore for the Nirbhaya fund and Rs. 100 crore for the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao fund to the ministry’s allocation, there is still a decrease of more than 1/3rd allocation in the total amount allocated for women and child development. But let us not forget that last two years’ budgets, 2013-14 and 2014-15, allocations under Nirbhaya fund were not utilised as the government has no concrete plan of action to create structures, channels and mechanisms to use this fund.

The Gender Budget has been drastically slashed by 20 per cent (less by Rs. 20,000 crore). A major chunk of the gender budget is cornered by Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) with an aim of population stabilisation and to meet the targets of ‘two-child norm’.

**Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme**

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS), a major safety net for poorest of the poor women has received a major blow. For women headed households where main economic burden of the family is shouldered by widows, separated, single and deserted women; the survival struggle will be more painful and extremely arduous due to symbolic increase in budgetary allocation for MGNREGS in the context of galloping inflation. The Finance Minister stated that he will only allocate an additional Rs. 5000 crores to the scheme if there is an increase in the revenue receipts of the government.

**Social Security**

Though the budget has provided for a pension, old age pension and social safety net fund, the allocation for finances for these much needed schemes is highly insufficient. There is a virtual phasing out of schemes like shelter homes for single women, one stop crisis centres and there is only a meager allocation of Rs. 30 crores for hostels for working women. The scheme for improving the working condition women and child labour has also been increased slightly.

India’s commitment to universal social security does not offer much in reality. In spite of high maternal and child mortality rates in our country, there is nothing on universal maternity benefit. In spite of hundreds of thousands of women involved in subsistence production, neither Economic Survey nor the budget recognises women farmers. The Budget included raising the agriculture credit target by Rs.50, 000 crore to Rs.8.5 trillion for 2015-16 fiscal and also announced financial support to enhance irrigation and soil health for higher agriculture productivity. A lot is being said about farmers’ welfare in the budget, but the Budget statement is strangely silent on women farmers.

**Health and Nutrition**

The Economic Survey presented along with the budget criticises the Public Distribution System (PDS) system and argues for the uniform application of the cash transfer scheme through Jan Dhan Aadhar and Mobile network (JAM) as a means of implementing food subsidy. Experience shows that this policy measure has failed to ensure proper nutrition for women as it cannot ensure adequate food for them. The gender budget in the health sector has been reduced by 17.9 per cent over last year’s revised estimate. The budget perceives women only as reproductive
beings, as a result overall health needs of women and girls are neglected. There is nothing in the budget for elderly women.

**Integrated Child Development Services and Mid-Day Meals**
The allocations under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and Mid-day Meal Schemes have come down by half, from over Rs. 16,000 crores to just Rs. 8,000 crores in the Union Budget. The government made an empty promise of increasing the allocations for ICDS by Rs. 1500 crores on condition of increase in revenue receipts.

**Housing and Urban Poverty**
Budgetary allocation for housing and urban poverty alleviation has been reduced from Rs. 6,008 crores in the previous year to Rs. 5,634 crores in the current budget. Financial allocation for the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) has reduced to 5.5 per cent as against mandated 8.2 per cent. Thus, as compared to the previous year’s budget, the current budgetary allocation for tribal development is short of Rs. 5000 crores. For Scheduled Castes (SC) it is 8.34 per cent instead of the mandated 17 per cent (less by Rs. 12,000 crore). No serious consideration is given to urban habitat for 380 million urban people living in subhuman condition.

**Education of Girls**
The disregard for girls’ education is also evident in this budget. The overall gender budget for school education has come down by 8.3 per cent over last year’s revised estimate. The budget for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has been reduced by 9.5 per cent. The much touted Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Abhiyan gets only Rs. 100 crores which is a mockery of this important slogan.

**Rail Budget**
The Rail Budget must give priority to increase the number of women’s compartments and prevent men from encroaching in them, improve lighting in all compartments, toilets and on railway platforms and outside railway stations, post policewomen and have a special helpline for women commuters. Moreover, the ministry must give top priority to cleanliness, affordable and safe food, sufficient toilets, clean drinking water and adequate health services on railway coaches and platforms. Most cases of kidnapping of women and children take place at the railway stations. Hence, ‘Women’s Help Desks’ which function 24 x 7 must be budgeted for and created to cover all major railway stations and junctions throughout the country.

**Infrastructure**
The allocation for infrastructure sector Rs 70,000 crores, but this amount doesn’t take into consideration any investment for reduction in the daily grind of unpaid care work done by women in terms of cooking, cleaning, caring, collection of fuel, fodder, water, looking after livestock and kitchen-gardening. It is high time that budget recognises, reduces and redistributes the women’s unpaid care and non-care work. Women pedestrians need footpaths, women vendors and entrepreneurs need market places, women commuters need affordable and safe transport, rest rooms and public toilets, elderly women in half way homes, but the union budget is not bothered about these crucial concerns of women.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the toiling poor, majority of who are women, are the major casualty as the budget hardly offers anything in terms of

- **Protective Services** - Sabla, Swadhar-scheme for women in Difficult Circumstances, Ujjawala Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of Trafficking, One stop Crisis centre for women and children survivors of violence on a 24 x 7 x 365 mode, night shelters for homeless women and children, short stay homes, welfare of working children.

- **Social Services** – Integrated Child Protection Scheme, Janani Suraksha Yajana, Grant – in- Aid, Creche, Community Food and Nutrition Extension Units, Kishori Shakti Yojana, Nutrition Programme for adolescent Girls.

- **Economic services** such as schemes for training and skill development, and provision for credit, infrastructure, marketing etc. which are critical to women’s economic independence and autonomy. e.g. STEP Support for Training and Empowerment of Girls, working women’s hostel.

- **Regulatory services** which include institutional mechanisms for women’s empowerment, such as State Commissions for Women, women’s cells in Police Stations, awareness generation programme etc. which provide institutional spaces and opportunities for women’s empowerment. e.g. Child-line Services.