

Interview Gender Dimensions of Public Expenditure

Ajita Kadirgamar interviews Diane Elson on the effects of Public Expenditure on the genders.



DIANE ELSON IS PROFESSOR AT THE SCHOOL OF Economic Studies, University of Manchester specializing in Gender and Economic Analysis and Structural Adjustment in Women.

She is one of the few women economists in the world and has worked for a long time on looking at economic policy from women's perspective.

She was in Sri Lanka recently as part of a Commonwealth team to conduct a study on Public Expenditure and National Budget and how it affects men and women.

What is this project all about?

Sri Lanka has agreed to be one of the pilot countries in a Commonwealth project

that springs from the last Commonwealth Meeting of Ministers of Women's Affairs which took place a year ago in Trinidad and Tobago. There issues were raised about macro economic policy and women and the difficulties of moving from the micro level of a project through the different layers of policy right to the macro level policy of a national budget and still having a focus on what are the implications of this on women and on men, are they the same etc.

An area that is left untouched in almost every country is economic policy making. One way into economic policy making is to focus on the national budget because this is a public event, presented to parliament, discussed in the press and there is a regular cycle of preparation for this kind of economic policy.

What we are here to do is set the ball rolling. To discuss with the relevant ministries what their ideas are about how this might be taken forward.

On what basis was Sri Lanka selected for this study?

Sri Lanka volunteered. We asked for volunteers from among Commonwealth countries. South Africa, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Barbados volunteered for the first stage. Sri Lanka is the only Asian country and its development has been such that there is a lot of capacity here. There is a lot of scope to try out a range of "tools" that could be used to gain an entry for women into the process of discussion of economic policy and economic decision making.

What do you mean by "Tools"?

This is a series of ways of looking at public expenditure that can be used from within government but also from outside of government (women's groups, research groups) to look at delivering public services. How do people feel about them? To look at statistics about how much is being spent and on what, whom the beneficiaries are. To look at ways in which public expenditure is planned and evaluated and whether there are ways that process can be developed in order to focus on the gender impact, the gender dimensions of public expenditure.

The whole idea of this project is not that anyone has ready made answers but that there is a set of possibilities and options that we wanted to explore with the different countries, to see how they might be used and developed.

These possibilities and options draw on a range of experiences. One is the

experience in Australia where in the 1980's they had a regular presentation of what they call the women's budget. At the same time that the national budget was presented, there was a statement of what the implications of the budget were for women and each department was asked to provide a statement of what proportion of its expenditure they expected to be of direct benefit to women. That was one of our inspirations.

We have also drawn on the experience in South Africa where they developed a project called the Women's Budget Project' which was a joint project between women in parliament and women in research institutes and the women's movement. We have drawn on some of their experience and used some of their tools to analyze the impact of the budget on sectors like health and education. The idea was to explore whether some of these tools could be used by different groups. Some could be used by the Ministry of Finance, Central Statistical office, Women's Affairs Ministry, Transport, Agriculture etc.... This would in various ways enable anybody to look at the budget through women's eyes.

When you talk of public expenditure are you speaking of areas like transport, sanitation, amenities?

Yes, what are often labeled the social sectors but also economic or infrastructure sectors.

In a country like Sri Lanka transport is a good issue, because women are more dependent on it, and if buses are crowded that's an environment that lends itself to sexual harassment. There are certainly things that can be done to improve the forms of public transport that women in particular use.

Then for example the Ministry of Trade and Industry is probably giving quite a lot of support to small businesses but do we know how many of these are men's small business, how many are women's. Credit is another area- how much goes to women?

The first thing is to establish what the facts are about the present pattern and who is benefiting from the services. Then discuss how far those are meeting people's needs and what would have to change in order for them to better.

Where will you get your statistics?

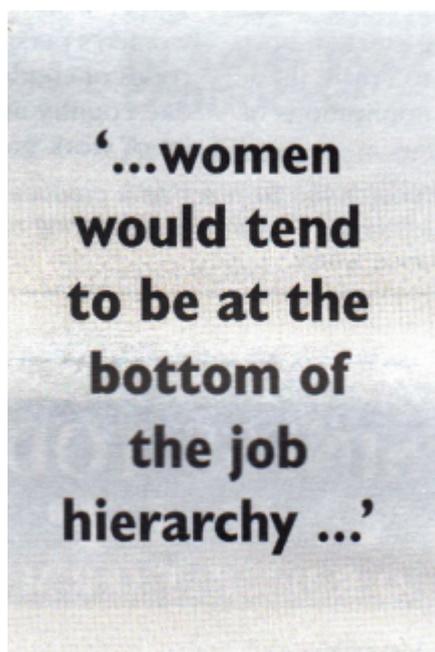
This is an area where women's organizations and research groups could also play a role. The tool we have identified is "beneficiary assessment where you go out and ask people who are supposed to be benefiting from public services, how far they are benefiting, are they satisfied, what barriers they find... that's a very participatory tool. It's a tool that women's organizations could develop. What do you think of the services you are getting from the government, are your needs being met etc.? You could feed this into the Finance or Women's Ministry.

What is the time frame for this study?

The pilot countries have agreed they will report back in September 1998 to the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting on their progress with this project. For instance steps they have taken, issues taken up, tools they have found useful which areas of the budget have been focused on, priorities, what process of collecting statistics, involvement of No's and so on. It's already started in South Africa so we are expecting that there will be a report.

Who have you met with here?

The mission has been having consultations with the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Women's Affairs, CENWOR, the Marga Institute, the Institute of Policy Studies, also UNDP and the World Bank to find out what they are doing that might be relevant to this project.



I personally am a Consultant and I was asked by the Commonwealth Secretariat to help them develop some ideas and set the ball rolling. We are also taking these ideas forward in Britain because we think it's something we need and we have set up a Women's Budget group in Britain, very much inspired by the South African model. We are hoping to have a meeting with the British Treasury in January 1998.

We are trying to use the South African, Australian and Sri Lankan experiences to get the British Treasury and British women parliamentarians to start thinking about what sort of tools can be used to take women's concerns into the discussion of economic policy in the Treasury in Britain.

The countries you have just mentioned have a relatively high level of women's participation in politics. Is this necessary for the economic advancement of women?

I think it helps a lot, but it doesn't guarantee it by any means or solve the problems. Having a presence of women in the Civil Service too helps, as it provides a platform. The great asset of Sri Lanka is that there is a highly educated group of women.

Are there many women economists and do you see the world differently?

There aren't so many women economists. If you think of all the other social sciences there are far more women in sociology, social policy, ecology... There are more women in business and management studies too than there are in economics.

What is your view of the 'glass ceiling'?

I think all over the world it is reality and there are a variety of reasons for it. Of course you can always find high profile women everywhere who manage to break through it, but you've also got to have structural transformations. I think one of the problems is still this imbalance with domestic responsibilities. It is still regarded as the woman's role and till we get more family friendly policies from private and public sector organizations, there's going to be that 'glass ceiling'. Even women who don't have children or old parents to look after, don't have personal domestic responsibilities, there's still the assumption that all women do.

What about wage discrimination?

It's an important issue and some progress has been made but there are still a lot of gaps all over the world. Particularly because a lot of women are in the informal

sector and women's businesses find it harder to make headway.

The issue of good quality public services for women is also an important issue in enabling women to take advantage of opportunities in the labor market and in the credit market.

The new export industries of Sri Lanka depend highly on women's labor both in garments and in tourism. That obviously transforms things to a certain extent because it creates new opportunities but it also creates new costs and I think sexual harassment is one of them. Also does this really transform things for women throughout their lives or is this an opportunity for just doing it when they are young? When they are married and have children they still have the double burden or do they lose the opportunity to earn their own income and become more dependent.

Health and safety issues are another problem and the abilities of women to organize and have more voice in the determination of working conditions is another important issue.

How do you define empowerment in relation to women?

One can't define it simply in terms of having income generating opportunities. It's very important but it's not enough because a lot also depends on what control women have over the income they've generated. The women who go to the Middle East and send back remittances, what control do they have over the use of those remittances, how far does it give them a better position in decision making within the family?

So I think empowerment has to be a multi dimensional thing. Education, legal rights, income earning, freedom from sexual harassment and violence and role decision making are all important things, getting them all to go together in a package.

What made you decide as an economist to focus on women?

I've always been part of the women's movement in Britain from the 60's. I also as an economist was working on issues of developing countries and I began by working on international issues, international trade and multinational corporations.

From that in the 70's I started to work on the issue of Women in the 'new export

oriented industries'. How is this happening? How is this new labor force being created, how international firms are organizing themselves to create these new export oriented industries, what are the implications of that for women?

I was looking at ways in which it started to break down some of the old ways in which women had been subordinated, because women would tend to be at the bottom of the job hierarchy lowest paid, least promotion prospects, sexual harassment, health and safety problems. There was a crumbling of old ways of being subordinated but maybe a building up of new ways. But at the same time there were a lot of creative organizations being built up to try and look at this and do something about it, seeing in what ways women could start gaining more of the benefits. It was that issue, trying to bring together my interest in the international economy and how that was being shaped and my interest in what were the implications of this for women that led me to work from then on as part of an international network.

As well as being an economist in the university and doing consultancy work for international organizations I also work with an NGO based in Manchester called "Women Working Worldwide". WWW's mission is to build alliances between organizations working on women workers' rights in Europe and similar organizations in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

We're doing quite a lot of work right now on International Trade, Women's Rights and Social Issues - how to get the women's perspective on this. We're also looking at things like codes of conduct for multinational corporations producing in one country and exporting to other countries. There's also a lot of work going on related to Ethical Business practices.