

Putting the sex into government budgets ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Gender analysis is crucial to helping government achieve social goals.

March brings budget time. Most people's eyes glaze over when the topic of government budgeting comes up, and they immediately lose interest. Not I. I find government budgets fascinating documents, as they show us what a particular government values (and what it doesn't value for that matter).

Budgeting is about setting priorities and allocating the necessary dollars to meet those priorities. By analysing government budgets, we can tell if government is putting its money where its mouth is, so to speak.

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A logical first step in setting government priorities would be to understand the population's needs and how different investment scenarios will affect different segments of the population. Government should make sure that the investment it makes, achieves the goals that it sets out for itself. For example, if on one hand a stated goal is to increase the literacy rates in the province but on the other hand the budget cuts the funds allocated to education, it is unlikely that this government will achieve its goal of improving literacy rates in the province.

The New Brunswick government does make an effort to consult with the population every year before making budgetary decisions. I have participated in a number of these consultations over the years as an engaged citizen. This process is important. There are other measures that governments can use to better understand the impact of its budgetary decisions. One of these tools is gender based analysis.

I, for one, wish that the New Brunswick government (and the Canadian government for that matter) would sex-up its budget process. By this I mean include elements of gender based analysis (or as it is sometimes called GBA) into its budget process.

In March 2008, the UN Commission on the Status of Women passed a resolution calling on all governments to conduct gender analyses of their budgets. Some national and regional governments have delivered on their international commitment to improve gender equality, by incorporating gender based analysis in their budget process.

Austria, Morocco, and Australia are among the over 60 jurisdictions to have used Gender-Based Analysis in their budget processes. In each case, the use of this analysis has led to sound investments. For example, in Australia, where a Gender-Based Analysis initiative was used in the budget process from 1984 to 1996, the number of daycare spaces increased fivefold (UNPAC). This is a very wise investment, as we are well aware of the return on investment in childcare services. In fact, here in Canada, every dollar invested in childcare services yields a return of \$2.30 in short-term GDP (Robert Fairholm, Centre for Spatial Economics).

All the while, in Canada, we seem to be falling further and further behind on this international measurement. The equality gap between men and women is widening over time, not receding. Out of the 157 countries evaluated under the United Nations Gender-Related Development Index, Canada ranks 83rd. Other countries such as Cuba and Mexico are leaping ahead of Canada when it comes to gender equality.

All levels of government in Canada — federal, provincial and municipal — could stand to sex-up their budgets a bit.

Some elected officials are nevertheless confused by what gender based analysis means. Some think that it means doing two budgets, with different tax rates, one for women and one for men. This is not true.

Others think that it simply means getting the female perspective on the budget (seeking input from female Cabinet Ministers, MLAs and women who participated in the pre-budget consultation process). Although seeking input into the budget-making process is important, this is not gender based analysis.

Gender budgeting is not a complicated concept though. It simply means analyzing how money is allocated and asking how that allocation of money impacts men and women differently.

In its January 30th edition, the Telegraph Journal reported the New Brunswick Finance Minister Blaine Higgs as saying about this year's budget process: "The challenge we have is not having money continually poured down black holes. We've said from the very beginning that we want to have a more efficient use of our tax dollars."

I agree. Perhaps conducting gender based analysis of budget decisions as well as other evidence-based analysis of the budget will help to make sure that we stop "pouring money down a black hole."

For anyone interested in learning more about gender budgeting, the Regroupement féministe (francophone feminist organization) is hosting and Women And Budget Day on February 15th. I plan to attend to learn more about this important topic.

Their keynote speaker is a Canadian expert on gender based analysis, named Charlotte Thibault. She will be speaking about: Why governments must take the needs of women and men into account in the budget process. I hope to see many politicians and policy-makers in attendance there too! For anyone interested in learning more about this event contact, see the link below.

I can hardly wait to budget day in New Brunswick. Like many other women, I will be looking for evidence of gender budgeting. Let's hope that it will be easy to find.

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