

The GAD Budget

Examining Public Financing with a Gender and Poverty Lens

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Some gains in gender-responsive governance

Among the countries in Southeast Asia, the Philippines stands out as a model for pioneering efforts in mainstreaming gender perspectives into politics and governance. Installing two female presidents since the Nairobi Women’s Conference in 1985—i.e., Corazon Aquino (1986-91) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2000-present)—seems to showcase a continuing commitment to women’s empowerment and gender equality. The leadership opportunity opened up to these two women in the political realm, however, represents neither the complete reform of a male-dominated system nor a definite testimony to the social equality of Filipino women and men. For it can also be argued that these women, who belong to political dynasties, merely stepped into politics to discharge their filial duties. Bringing women into political leadership and mainstreaming gender into governance is an ongoing process in which gains are neither definite nor irreversible. But nobody said it would be easy.

The realm of governance and political leadership, at least since 1986, certainly represents an arena in which individual as well as organized Filipino women have been visible. As a result, new pro-women laws have been passed, including a redefined Rape Law and a law against sexual harassment instituted for the public sector. A gender-responsive development plan is in place. Women’s groups are organized at the community and national levels and are called on as participants in consultative processes on many issues, as well as allowed to sit as members of the national government’s anti-poverty commission and local development committees. Political parties now exert more effort in fielding women candidates. Gender focal points and gender-awareness strategies exist in various agencies of the national government, as well as in local government units. And there is the Gender and Development (GAD) Budget Policy aimed at addressing gender issues in government and among clients, with the use of dedicated public funds.

The continuing negotiation to win spaces for gender mainstreaming in Philippine political institutions was made possible by the synergy of various agents of institutional change. Playing a strategic role is the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW), a body formed under the aegis of the

executive branch, which spearheads gender mainstreaming in government. Then there is the women's movement, many of whose former activist leaders increasingly carried the banner of "engagement with government and in electoral politics" after the new space for democratic governance and open politics was put in place following the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. The Women's Studies Association of the Philippines (WSAP), and its nationwide affiliate of academic institutions and academe-based women, have also significantly contributed to the increase in the number of practitioners in gender mainstreaming. These practitioners, in turn, served as gender advisers, consultants, trainers, and evaluators for various government and multilateral aid projects and programs. Foreign agencies involved in international aid and cooperation—the UN-attached agencies among them—also promote global commitments to women's leadership and good governance. By providing financing and other capacity-building resources, the foreign agencies sustain the activities of domestic change agents in government.

While the institutional and legal mechanisms, institution-based advocates of gender equality, and organized women's initiatives are certainly in place, there continues to be resistance to gender mainstreaming on the part of some members of the bureaucracy and certain politicians who persist in keeping their gender-blind view of political and governance priorities, willing only to provide token recognition of women's needs. Clearly there remains the need to combine advocacy with more effective monitoring of compliance, if the political, legal, and administrative guarantees won on paper are to be more fully realized, if not altogether defended. A dramatic case in point is the recent challenge to the GAD Budget Policy put up by some government economists who saw the policy as a source of budget distortion, and therefore as something that had better be set aside.¹

The GAD Budget Policy

The GAD Budget Policy authorizes government agencies, offices, bureaus, state universities and colleges, government-owned and -controlled corporations, and now, local government units (LGUs) to utilize at least 5 percent of their annual budget for GAD-related activities. It began as an expressed public financing commitment to the specific goals, services, and activities for women that had been identified in the Philippine Plan for Gender Responsive Development (PPGD), 1995-2025, followed by a Presidential Memorandum issued to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) by former President Fidel Ramos in 1996.

The issuance of administrative guidelines came much later by way of Joint Circular 99-4 issued by the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), the DBM, and the NCRFW. The policy was further strengthened via Section 27 of RA 8760,

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otherwise known as the General Appropriations Act, passed also in 1999. Additional guidelines were issued by the three concerned agencies in Joint Circular 2001-1.

A combination of low-key and astute insider lobbying by certain women in government, led by the NCRFW, as well as lobbying by women's groups, propelled the birth of the GAD Budget Policy. At that time, the lack of financial commitment to support the country's implementation of global commitments to women's rights and development was reverberating as an international issue. Filipino women advocates of equality who were exposed to the international debate had energetically pursued the issue on the domestic institutional front.

How was the figure arrived at?

The proportion of government funds set aside for gender and development was pegged at only 5 percent. Although it was clear that the accurate text in the mandate read: "Agencies are authorized to utilize *at least* 5 percent of their total budget appropriations for GAD-related activities," there was not much optimism that any agency would go beyond this base. Many of the agency heads, some of Cabinet rank, were not receptive to the policy. Moreover a budget squeeze felt by the Ramos government toward the end of its term dimmed whatever glimmer of hope the few optimists in government had. Perhaps most critical was the absence of any concrete basis for valuing the GAD fund to 5 percent of agency appropriation. Government could not provide figures on how much the services and activities found in the lofty PPGD actually cost on an annual basis.

Without the necessary computation behind the proportional allocation to GAD, it was easy enough to dismiss the 5 percent benchmark as a political concession that was neither significant nor to be taken seriously. The NCRFW and the women gender advocates, however, had a different perception and attitude. It was the first time that government had assured funding for GAD activities, and they vowed to ensure stronger implementation and compliance by all agencies concerned.

What is the budget for?

The GAD Budget was initially aimed at the appropriations of government agencies to support their own GAD-related activities. Discretion on the fund's utilization was left to agency heads, in consultation with the agency focal points and/or committees.

As originally stipulated, it was not a social fund, which women's groups had direct access to. On the positive side, however, the GAD Budget ensured that funds could at least be set aside to support gender-sensitivity training, as well as services for females in the bureaucracy, such as the establishment of *crèche*.

The GAD Budget clearly unburdened the NCRFW of having to scrounge for money for its strategic intervention activities in government—activities that had previously been funded almost entirely through foreign grants. Within the wider women's movement, the GAD budget's beneficiaries were clearly the GAD trainers and consultants whose technical assistance could now be paid for from out of the dedicated funds, and a limited number of women's groups that participated in joint GO-NGO projects and processes.

Although the GAD Budget Policy initially did not include local government units (LGUs), feminists who had become local officials, or who had sat as NGO representatives in Social Development Committees at the local level, successfully lobbied for funds in support of their projects and activities. This found convergence with the efforts of some women in government who were intent on lobbying for the effective extension of the GAD Budget Policy to LGUs. Eventually, a Local Budget Memorandum issued in 2000 by the DBM called for the application of the 5 percent GAD Budget to the CY 2001 plans of LGUs. This was followed by Joint Memorandum Circular 2001-03, issued by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), the DBM, and the NCRFW, providing guidelines for integrating GAD in the local planning and budgeting system.

The expansion of the GAD Budget into the realm of LGUs effectively opened the public finance window to co-determination and access by ordinary women's groups. Local communities could now lobby for funds in support of their own projects, beginning from the lowest administrative unit (*barangay*) all the way to the provincial level.

This has given a new significance to the GAD Budget: it has now become an enabling mechanism for broadening the democratic and participatory governance process. It has also begun to win the enthusiastic support of a more significant section of the women's movement, particularly those groups involved in encouraging women to enter electoral politics, as well as NGOs that supported the activities of community groups of ordinary women. Increasingly, successful local attempts to access the GAD Budget are being documented, a development that augurs well for a country whose re-democratization

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process remains young and volatile, and where gains in social development could easily be waylaid by a change of administration.

A reality check, however, on how the GAD Budget was being spent by some government agencies, came in 1999 by way of a newspaper exposé written by a respectable investigative journalist (Jimeno 1999). She found out that the fund was being used in some cases to support events such as aerobics classes, cooking lessons, ballroom dancing, and office outings. This raised an alarm among some people in government and in the wider women's movement on the need to examine more closely the implementation of the GAD Budget lest it serve, not as a tool for gender mainstreaming in governance and development as it was intended to be, but as a vehicle for added inefficiency and wastage of the people's money.

The NCRFW, for its part, consistently produced examples of best practice to inform the public and sustain advocacy inside government on the merits of the GAD Budget Policy. The latest NCRFW publication contains a collection of case studies across different levels of national agencies and LGUs, summarizing lessons gained thus far in the implementation of the new policy. The case studies primarily document experiences in the implementation of the GAD Budget at the local level, although two cases of implementation by government agencies, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and the DILG, and one case of implementation by a government-run academic institution, the Cagayan State University, are included.

These cases show that indeed ordinary women's groups at the local level are benefiting from the allocation of funds in support of GAD activities, specifically by: (1) providing small loans for women's livelihood projects; (2) conducting education workshops on women's human rights and gender issues; (3) establishing local women's centers that respond to issues of women's health and violence against women, including abuse in intimate and family relations; (4) formulating integrated women's development/GAD programs and continuing GAD advocacy at various levels; and (5) strengthening citizenship actions by local women's organizations. Government agencies, for their part, highlighted the value of the GAD Budget by increasing their staff capacity to mainstream gender into plans and programs.

Problems cited, on the other hand, include the following: (1) GAD activities remain susceptible to changes in administration or to the presence or absence of a GAD advocate; (2) amounts dedicated to GAD activities are inadequate; and (3) the real economic impact of small loans on poor women is uncertain.

In the words of Aurora Javate de Dios, the current chairperson of the NCRFW: "The case studies showed that there are as many options and possibilities as there are problems" (Valdeavilla and Manapat 2001). With full force, the NCRFW recently declared its intention to defend the GAD Budget as a feature of the public budget system, and called on women's groups to do the same.

A need to popularize

Although an increasing number of women's organizations are learning about the GAD Budget Policy, much remains to be done to gain wide public awareness of even its existence, more so of its usefulness in meeting the development needs of ordinary women. People also have to be made familiar with the budgeting process itself. A clear indication of this need is that even the gender trainers themselves do not have uniform information and understanding of the policy, and only a handful of them integrate this into their education and training modules. This situation hampers advocacy initiatives among government agencies and LGUs, which are often the clients of the gender trainers and consultants. Such weaknesses may account for the uneven understanding found among government service providers, policy makers, and local officials, particularly those who continue to resist by downplaying gender mainstreaming efforts.

Moreover, only a few NGOs involved in community organizing have been able to incorporate literacy and capacity-building activities for grassroots women to make them effective in seeking accountability from government and local officials in the use of the GAD Budget. This, again, is a big loss. The NCRFW is a small agency; it cannot do everything by itself. To be efficient and effective, the NCRFW needs to network and coordinate with other groups that have access to people, particularly the most needy. This is necessary not only to expand horizontal geographic reach, but also to deepen vertical macro-micro coherence to reach the chronic poor, half of whom are women.

An invigorated information strategy on its GAD agenda, including the GAD Budget Policy, was activated by the NCRFW in the beginning of 2002. There are two critical and intertwined objectives in the strategy.

The first is to broaden the NCRFW's reach among women's groups, advocates, and gender trainers. This is in response to difficulties encountered by some women's groups and NGOs in accessing information. It is widely known that, in the Philippines, access to government information and resources continues to be a function of political capital despite recent efforts in democratic and good governance.

The second objective of the strategy is to reach a consensus on how to harmonize the content of GAD messages found in diverse trainings, education, and advocacy initiatives, in a way that builds up on and consolidates lessons from past efforts. In the case of certain political, administrative, and legal gains in GAD, it is clear that there is need for massive education within and outside of government in order to strengthen implementation and monitoring of results, as well as to defend gains that may be threatened by new government priorities and

concerns. The recent questioning of the merits of the GAD Budget from a consideration of public finance represents an important case in point.

Situating the GAD Budget in economic governance

The GAD Budget Policy is undoubtedly an important instrument for realizing gender-responsive governance in the Philippines. As a guaranteed fund for GAD projects, it ensures that the services and programs aimed at the empowerment and development of women are kept in the forefront of priorities in regular government planning.

To make the fund work democratically, effectively, and efficiently, three things need to happen.

First, there needs to be a process that enables government, in particular the NCRFW, to identify the specific activities in the PPGD that ought to be prioritized on a medium-term basis. The PPGD is a long-term plan that features a complicated listing of GAD services and programs. Government planning, on the other hand, takes place on an annual basis and is framed by each administration's policy priorities. Priority plans and spending also vary according to local conditions.

The major challenge, however, is to draw up this medium-term GAD guideline with the view of reaching the poorest women in the poorest region. Thus, the GAD Plan ought to be able to find coherence and complementation with the national and local anti-poverty programs of government. It is hard to imagine that any government agency exists that does not have its contribution to fighting poverty, although some agencies have made the claim that their specialized tasks do not lend them to providing direct services for the poor. However, poverty eradication is not just about services; it is a total and synchronized effort at economic governance, the aim of which, in any society, is the social good. In this light, the GAD priority in the Department of Finance, for instance, might be to undertake gender-sensitive poverty impact assessment of its financial policies and programs, or in the Bureau of Internal Revenue, it might be to review taxation policies and practices, again, from a gender-sensitive poverty reduction lens. The same assessment could be applied in the area of trade liberalization, where the manner in which policies are pursued have been found to be disadvantageous to the poor and to women.

Second, the medium-term plan needs to have an accompanying budget estimate. Serious effort is needed in costing GAD priorities. This is crucial if the GAD plans are to ever find realistic levels of financing. It also goes without saying that estimates of costs are part and parcel of good financial planning and performance. The total resources gained from the 5-percent share of GAD from government appropriations and from the Annual Investment Plans of LGUs could then be assessed in terms of sufficiency. It is easy enough to anticipate that there will be a financing gap. Filling up the gap could immediately come by way of accessing funds from the private sector and from international aid agencies. On a more strategic consideration, data that shows a continuing shortfall in financing could provide the basis for demanding a future increase in the proportional share of the GAD Budget.

Finally, there is need to put up an effective monitoring and surveillance procedure that would ensure that funds are actually spent on the target services, programs, and activities—and would monitor whether intended results are

achieved. The NCRFW has indeed begun to step up its coordination with relevant government agencies, such as NEDA, the DBM, and the DILG. This is good, but not enough. Innovative and more participatory methods of monitoring and surveillance could be used to complement existing ones that largely depend on reporting procedures (Wilmott, Tibbett and Simmons n.d.). One of these methods calls for the NCRFW to seek a further mandate to start—if it hasn't done so yet—its own monitoring and supervision procedure. Another is to explore ways on how to incorporate the efforts of women advocates and groups that are outside of government. Transparency in sourcing and spending of public funds, in this case the GAD Budget, needs to be nurtured by a regular and dynamic public information system. A strong citizenry, fully aware of its citizenship rights and able to express this in active political action, is vital not just for the GAD Budget and for poverty eradication, but for the entire democratic fabric of society.

Ending remarks

The NCRFW has recently recognized the need in its programmatic agenda to strengthen the aspect of women's economic empowerment. To do so, it would be sensible for the NCRFW to build upon the limited opportunity thus far opened up by the GAD Budget Policy by involving Filipino women in shaping economic policies aimed at poverty eradication. Education and advocacy around the GAD Budget Policy must include a broader economic literacy curriculum that allows ordinary women to understand and effectively engage government on issues related to the broader and systemic economic (and not just public financial) policy environment.

The GAD Budget is thus just the beginning. Filipino women and gender advocates who are also advocates of human and social security must use the GAD Budget as a springboard to seek more assertively from government the basics of good governance for poverty eradication and gender-fair social development.

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Note:

¹ This was a challenge from some economists within the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) that was actively and effectively opposed by the NCRFW, with the support of women's groups and individual advocates of gender equality within and outside government. To this day, the GAD Budget remains a regular feature of the government budgeting system.

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