

Some reflections on the Kerala budget: Concerns of gender and informal sector

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The Kerala budget which was presented on the 4th of June is the final and extended version of the interim budget that Dr. Thomas Isaac presented in January, 2021. As the January budget was placed before the state after the first wave of COVID 19, many measures to contain the effects of the pandemic were included. The first budget of the new government had to consider the devastating experiences of the second wave of the deadly disease. Definitely more cautious measures are included in the new budget presented by the Finance Minister, K.N. Balagopal. We all have seen how dreadful the pandemic is, especially amongst the lower strata of the society. It was an eye opener to the mainstream society vis-à-vis the vulnerabilities and destruction that the informal economy in the country has to face. This budget has a special emphasis on livelihood packages for the informal sector workers. In the 20, 000 crore COVID package it was mentioned that 8900 crores will be spent for disbursing money directly to those who are in crisis due to loss of livelihood and 8300 crores as interest subsidy for loans provided for economic rejuvenation. When we look at more detailed allocations of this account, it was found that the existing livelihood package through Kudumbasree is raised to 100 crores as subsidy for enterprises and also to impart training to those who have lost their livelihoods. Value added production in the agriculture sector through the 70000 women collective farming groups is another area. Generating employment opportunities in the care economy is another suggestion that has come up. The budget also promises to increase the number of working days in both MNREGA and Ayyankali urban employment guarantee programmes. Special programs to support enterprises in the Scheduled caste/scheduled tribe sector and also mentioned in the budget. Moreover, the gender specific budget has a 20% allocation of the total amount which has been a substantial increase from the last year's budget.

State of the informal sector was not decent before the pandemic itself. Women participation rate in employment is still around 20% which is extremely low. Majority of the work women are engaged in are not counted as employment and no decent employment relationships are involved in it. The pandemic has caused severe damages to the livelihoods of the poor, informal working class. Compared to the central or other state governments Kerala Government has taken special measures to contain the loss of lives and livelihoods of people. Universal distribution of rations, food kits and community kitchens have consistently saved people from hunger. As a temporary means of relief this was the most essential approach but sustaining people in the long run is not well planned. Most of the recovery measures were based on loan schemes, either short-term or long-term. Enterprises which have been built up or revived using this loan have again got affected during the second wave and people who have taken loans are in a traumatic situation. They are not able to resume their business after the second wave. It was again a blow to these people who have no other means for livelihood. There should be a rethinking on the means of support for these recovering livelihoods. Already most of the women have a huge burden of loans in their hands through government agencies and private micro finance institutions. Sustainable livelihood options with financial support is the need of the hour. Alternate livelihood mechanisms through local economic sustainability will provide a breathing space in these unexpected situations.

Access to resources and viable employment opportunities for traditional communities will only support the workers there. Most of the traditional sectors are survived by women and there is a passivity in terms of minimum wages and other support for these workers. Technological and new skills innovation only can enhance their status. The budget has kept aside a huge share for coastal management. More systematic and resilient activities for the fisher people should come as the priority in this. The pandemic has affected the normal activities in the fisheries sector. Women who are selling fish in the coastal communities of Trivandrum and Kollam had to completely stop their livelihood due to COVID protocol. During that time youngsters and others who have lost their other means of livelihood from the mainland areas have opted for fish vending as their living. This had to do with access to vehicles, online facilities and availing new market techniques. Poor women, who have no such access had to forcibly be at home. This has created chaos in the marketing areas. So, the government should make more concerted efforts to support the livelihood activities of women in the fisheries sector.

This budget is talking about the care economy. We are eagerly waiting for its structural framing and its link to the knowledge economy which is a focus of the budget. Women who are pushed to more care-oriented jobs are marginalized in the labour markets especially domestic workers and those who are involved in so called 'menial' jobs. In the last budget Rs. 5 crore was earmarked for domestic workers. This is a sector where the visible invisibility of employers got exposed during COVID. Measures to address this instability of the sector should come as a priority. There are other possibilities of young women who are para medical or nursing professionals who are jobless to get integrated into the local knowledge economy plans through systematic identification of opportunities and networking.

Gender budget document says around 20% of the total budget is allocated for women-oriented programs and schemes. Skills get so much attention in gender budgeting. We have to critically analyze the skill augmenting process in the state through Kudumbasree which is the nodal agency for National Rural and Urban Livelihood Mission. The employment situation is not identified before fixing the training and quite common skill workshops are organized without any options for the future. Same person will get training for many things and none of them are converted to employment. Linkage between skills and employment opportunities through convergence of various departments can address this lapse of spending money without employment creation. A large majority of women are engaged in home-based workers in the state. Some are part of the international or domestic supply chains, and many are self-employed, running their own account enterprises. But there is no regulation in the state for such employment that is inside the private space of houses. There is a mechanism to measure the number of hours these women spend for work and also their productivity. Sustainability of these works which have a manifold impact on the life and livelihood of women is particularly important. Integrating new technologies into the jobs that women are undertaking will enhance their productivity thereby wages too. Equal pay for equal jobs and also systematic re-designing of work deviating from the traditional normative should get highlighted in the gender budget. Most of the women are working in their homes or other homes or public spaces. Converting these unconventional workspaces to decent workspaces can only improve their situations.

Another new scheme that has been announced in the budget is the 'Smart Kitchen' project. This has been envisaged as an approach to ease the burden of women in the kitchen through

modern gadgets. It is not the responsibility of the women to make the kitchen smart and as family is a joint venture of the people involved in it, an idea of equality should generate from sharing equal responsibilities. On the other hand, this project should ensure more participation of women in the workforce. The government should initiate specific measures to ensure minimum wages for women workers in the informal sector and also develop novel schemes of social security for these most vulnerable categories of workers. While in the main budget there are many schemes announced to enhance the work participation rate of women, the state has to be alert on the money being spent earlier and the structural limitations that were experienced while developing implementation mechanisms. The short life of many of these enterprises have to be analyzed objectively to a renewed vision and mission. Actions to prevent prolonged informality need professional handholding and mentoring. Wide range of activities looking at the diverse needs of the people involved have to be planned for the formalization process. It is the responsibility of the state to support the workers who have no visible employers. The state is ought to enable income and wage support schemes for these workers who have no other means of support.

While many schemes for the returnee migrants have been announced, the plight of women workers mostly involved in domestic work and other care work in GCC countries mostly goes unnoticed. They have faced a lot of issues from the beginning of their migration including illegality and exploitative employment situations. They face estrangement and seclusion once they return from their families even. When the reintegration packages are planned these women should get proper inclusion through well prepared livelihood programs.

It is not jobless growth that we have to talk about but a growth-based economy with jobs in the production and service sectors. Acknowledging the contribution of the low paid workers through systematic and sustainable support of income and social security will boost the economy. Critically looking at some of the activities like employment guarantee programs both rural and urban, enterprise formulation and marketing strategies will create a more favorable employment for workers in the informal sector, especially women workers.