

Fostering Participation in Gender Budgeting: A Proposal for an Online System to Enhance Citizens' Engagement in Gender-Responsive Budgeting

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Abstract: A controversial issue in the public management literature is the role attributed to women. Analyzing the existing literature, few works have been written about how the presence of women is valued in the public sector. From this analysis, several discriminatory elements are still present, and gender equality seems to be far away. However, this objective must continue to be pursued, also considering the relevance given to the gender equality issue by the United Nations in the Sustainable Development Goals. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to implement political, economic and societal legislation, programs and policies to minimize the differences between men and women. In this perspective, Gender Budgeting (GB) could be an interesting field of research. It consists of a systematic review about how women benefit from public sector expenditures, an adjustment of budgets to ensure equality of access to public sector expenditures, enhancing productive capacity and meeting social needs. However, GB could be adopted differently and could produce several results. In particular, the implementation of GB as a participatory tool is still nowadays a challenge and could be fascinating to analyze, considering the various benefits that a participatory approach could imply. One of the main reasons for the lack of direct citizens involvement in GB is that it was initially developed from a macro-perspective at the national budget. On the other hand, other participatory tools, such as the participatory budget, originate at the local level. Therefore, examining the existing literature and focusing on two different processes, but with some overlapping characteristics elements, namely participatory budgeting and gender budgeting, the present research aims to create a participatory GB framework, investigating the insertion of a participatory perspective in the process, specifically women's engagement, not neglecting the relevance of digitalization to this end.

Keywords: gender equality, budget cycle, participatory governance, gender responsive budgeting, women's empowerment

1. Introduction

In recent years, several routes have been entered to make the process of determining and reporting public expenditure more participatory to meet citizens' needs more equitably and inclusively (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). Public administrations could adopt a wide range of tools, possibilities and methods in formulating and implementing their public policies, aiming to increase the degree of citizens' engagement (Sintomer et al., 2013). This search for widespread participation has allowed the contribution of new ideas and soft skills to determine a more effective allocation of public resources from both financial and social points of view (Verba & Nie, 1987). Overcoming the New Public Management ideals (Hood, 1991), new policies must go beyond the achievement of the renowned three "Es" (efficiency, effectiveness and economy) (Rhodes, 1996), also allowing for the achievement of other objectives, following the New Public Governance paradigm (Osborne, 2006). However, despite the efforts made by the public administrations, the consolidation of these participatory practices did not prove to be sufficient to achieve equal access and contribution by both genders, as women recorded lower inclusion scores in participatory processes (Allegretti & Falanga, 2016). In addition, examining the existing literature on the public sector, gender issues are still not solved, and several discriminatory events are still present (Paoloni et al., 2021). This has led some public administrations, albeit in a fragmented and non-organic way, to adopt Gender Budgeting (GB), to incorporate the gender perspective within the participatory budget, to hold governments accountable for their policies and actions in the field of gender equality.

However, although the use of GB is growing due to the benefits already mentioned, few studies have currently focused on gender budgeting in a more participatory format (Steccolini, 2019). Therefore, further attention needs to be paid to it. Within this scenario, it is interesting to note that, also because of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments, at both national and international levels, are increasing available resources for the adoption of recovery plans, in which digitization is seen as one of the pivotal pillars and a driving force for the recovery itself. Thus, it seems helpful to investigate, through the identification of new application models, which could be the

most significant contribution given by the digital transformation tools to the process of determining and reporting public spending, to make public budgeting more gender-inclusive and participatory.

To this end, based on a literature review, a proper exploration of the state of the art of participatory budgeting is in-depth illustrated, also considering the relevance of digital tools in citizens' participation (Section 2). Then, the variables of participatory gender budgeting to contrast the existing gender gap are explored (Section 3). Finally, given the determinants, a proposal for a new participatory gender budgeting model is presented (Section 4), and conclusions are drawn (Section 5).

2. Participatory budgeting and digitalization

Contemporary governments are facing various problems related to their relationship with citizens (Fung & Wright, 2003). Over the last decades, people have stopped believing that the authorities represent their interests. They are sceptical about the effectiveness and fairness of the politicians' activities (Swaner, 2017); therefore, the trust in institutions has drastically dropped. Public administrations have to overcome the New Public Management compulsive search for efficiency, coming back to citizens' needs and accomplishing people's expectations (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). In this line, it becomes strategic to undertake and fortify paths of the population's engagement and participation (Lodewijckx, 2019), starting from local institutions, the government level closest to citizens. This led to the determination of the so-called participatory governance in which citizens are involved in public choices under the communicative, visionary and decision-making dimension through more listening, negotiation, consultation and discussion activities (Vigoda, 2002). Citizens recover from the initial disadvantage, strengthening their capacity to intervene and influence public choices, determining the model of Empowered Participatory Governance (Fung & Wright, 2003). This model has precisely the purpose - through the understanding of practical problems, participatory involvement and the application of practical solutions - to study the ways of reorganizing state institutions, trying to understand whether it is possible to stimulate democratic commitment in society and strengthen the bonds that are created. It aims to create institutions that can be more participatory and responsive by realizing the effective participation of citizens. Among the existing and different participatory tools, such as public debate, collaboration agreements, citizen sensing, petitions and referendums, participatory budget is of particular interest. Specifically, participatory budgeting (PB) has been an innovation in the budgeting processes since this instrument allows the citizenry to participate in resource allocation actively (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007; Bartocci, Grossi & Mauro, 2019; Mattei, Santolamazza & Grandis, 2022). Even if several PB formats could be set up (Sintomer et al., 2013), it usually allows identifying - *ex-ante* - the population's needs and proposals helpful in implementing citizens-responsive policies (Allegretti, 2010). The greater democracy and decisions' interactivity implied in PB has enhanced the public administration capacity to coordinate actors, social groups and institutions and manage common decisions discussed and defined collectively in fragmented and uncertain territories. For this reason, PB could be counted in the group of processes related to New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006) since it emphasizes the public administration's role in coordinating the plurality of interests of relevant stakeholders (Wiesel & Modell, 2014).

This continuous process of cooperation and adjustment between different and conflicting interests has led to the alternation of top-down, verticalized models, with policies imposed by governments on the communities, and bottom-up, coming from a plurality of diversified actors. As a result, PB has determined a more widespread and circular concept of power than pyramidal, centralized and self-referential. PB provides the opportunity to influence political decisions to all interested people, so-called stakeholders, on the basis of their capacities (Stortone & De Cindio, 2015). The plurality of institutional stakeholders (Clarkson, 2016) is experienced through a renewed dialogue and the sharing of guidelines such as sustainability, consensus, legitimacy, and related key dimensions (Cashore, 2002; Secco et al., 2010).

A relevant issue in this process is how to foster citizens' participation. In this context, digital tools could help overcome some of the difficulties related to PB, allowing the inclusion of more people and bringing other benefits (Sampaio & Peixoto, 2014; Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). Specifically, digitalizing PB may facilitate the process itself, influencing each stage, from how information is delivered to how people are identified, engaged and allowed to vote (Vydra & Klievink, 2019). Adopting digital tools in the PB could be fundamental in recreating a real public sphere, fostering discussion and collaboration among participants (Sønderskov, Rønning & Magnussen, 2021). However, digitalization must be well-managed to avoid all its negative effects, such as digital inequalities (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2018) or mere innovations that turn out to be smokescreen (Allegretti, 2012), not fostering citizens' engagement (Stortone & De Cindio, 2015). Among others, the use of interactive

platforms, the creation of an online place to debate, online voting and continuous monitoring could increase PB effectiveness (Sampaio & Peixoto, 2014).

3. Participatory gender budgeting

By allowing the direct participation of citizens in the allocation of public resources, PB increases the civic culture of the interested citizens, the generation of better-shared decisions given an appropriate level of discussion and information and the legitimacy of the choices (Sintomer et al., 2013; Bartocci, Grossi & Mauro, 2019). Therefore, considering the beneficial effects of the citizens' engagement in the budgeting process (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006), a PB that considers the gender element was studied and the overlaps between it and gender budgeting were explored in-depth (Ng, 2016).

Gender budgeting (GB) is a budgeting document that evaluates an administration's political, economic and financial choices with a gender mainstreaming view (United Nations, 1995). Gender mainstreaming consists of "the reorganization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, aimed at incorporating a gender equity perspective in all policies at all levels and in all phases, by the actors normally involved in the policy-making process" (Council of Europe, 1998). It is both a principle to be integrated within all the sectors of public intervention and a process useful to understand the causes of the disparity between women and men in society, identifying the best strategies to counter this divergence. GB is probably the most relevant tool in pursuing gender equity since it consists of a "gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process" (Council of Europe, 2005: 10). Furthermore, it fosters the concept of gender equality in rights and duties between females and males, also in terms of equal treatment in accessing resources and opportunities (Klatzer et al., 2018; Pastore & Tommaso, 2020).

GB could be implemented in several ways and could produce various results (Klatzer et al., 2018; Pastore & Tommaso, 2020). Specifically, it could be set with different methodologies, namely *ex-ante*, concurrent and *ex-post* approaches (Rubin & Bartle, 2005). *Ex-ante* approaches are less spread and relate to assessing gender needs through gender-sensitive surveys or thanks to ideas and projects collected by focus groups, formulating the budget and determining the "binding budget" (Polzer, Nolte & Seiwald, 2021). Concurrent tools are used by public administrations when they consider a gender perspective during their resource allocation through programme-based budgeting or tracking gender spending (Polzer, Nolte & Seiwald, 2021). Finally, when GB is set up with an *ex-post* approach, monitoring, evaluation and impact analysis activities are carried out, understanding possible deviations and determining the new objectives of the budget cycle. This approach is also called gender auditing (Rubin & Bartle, 2005). The comprehensive gender budgeting approach incorporates all three stages of the budgeting process (Polzer, Nolte & Seiwald, 2021).

However, despite the international commitment, gender equality does not prove to have been yet achieved in any country; progress is slow and gender gaps still exist in work, wages, assistance and pensions. Therefore, more policies should be implemented in this view (Speeden, 2012) and, among them, rethinking GB in a more participatory lens could be a solution (Steccolini, 2019). This is what the international forces require, as the various objectives and sub-objectives of the UN 2030 agenda suggest (United Nations, 2015). Focusing on the sustainable goal number 5, it is stated that public administrations should implement processes aimed at "guaranteeing full participation of women and equal leadership opportunities at every political, economic and public level". This could be done by "strengthening the use of enabling technologies to promote women's emancipation" (Goal n.5).

Therefore, in this scenario, the participatory gender budgeting sees citizens as protagonists in the allocation of resources to pursue gender equality, increasing transparency and knowledge and reducing gender discrimination. This would bring empowered citizens (especially women) closer to the local authority. A more participatory GB is realized by adopting various tools for bottom-up citizen involvement such as interviews, workshops, focus groups, debates. However, despite its relevance, GB still takes place on a voluntary basis, determining its limited adoption in both qualitative and quantitative terms. To stimulate the adoption of participatory gender budgeting and its effectiveness, it is necessary to identify more standardized procedures for different contexts, encouraging women and involving them from the early first step of the budgeting process. This could be especially done in the micro-perspective level of local governments, which could have a more significant impact on citizens' life (Frey, 2016).

4. The base of a new “participatory” gender budgeting model

As overcoming the gender gap cannot ignore a greater standardization of the GB to favour its simplified adoption, GB cannot ignore the interrelation with participatory budgeting to translate the citizens' expectations for gender equality in the resources' allocations. If, on the one hand, GB usually provides for the participation of citizens with their comments and reviews in the final phase of the budgeting cycle, i.e., in the auditing phase, on the other hand, PB operates *ex-ante*, providing for citizens' engagement when the local governments must develop their own budget, allocating economic and financial resources following the citizens' proposals (Falanga & Allegretti, 2016). Therefore, it is possible to state that any participatory model dedicated to repairing gender inequality must integrate *ex-ante* PB tools (dynamic to estimate) and *ex-post* GB tools (static to final balance), involving citizens in the decision-making phase. The citizenry is also supposed to support the institution in the final stage, creating a virtuous and consequential circle of enrichment of reporting performance and reprogramming the budget. This co-governance partnership between participatory and gender budgeting could become an ideoscape, suggesting a model that becomes real only through the use and experimentation of countries around the world, necessarily based on the standardization of tools and procedures nowadays still dissimilar in their application. This would transform participatory gender budgets into ideal venues to collectively discuss the distribution of resources towards new and innovative, more advanced and less fragmented forms of government, capable of re-reading budgets in a gender key and eliminating the disadvantages for women.

The phases of this model cannot be separated from the context analysis of the community's gender preferences, the analysis of the strategic program and executive management plans. Personnel qualification and identification of standardizable indexes are fundamental for the model's diffusion in the long term and to achieve favourable results towards a regime of transparency, equity and efficiency in the allocation of local resources. This standardization should take into account the procedures and tools for the participation of digital citizenship that are made available by the public administration to citizens. In this view, citizens must exploit digitization and its sharing tools, which are still adopted in a different and uneven way today because of various contexts and different levels of digital skills in the population.

Considering the new funds available from the various post-Covid recovery plans, the proposition of a single digital platform on which all stakeholders can participate in the process of "public participatory gender budgeting" appears to be the most functional (Bria, 2019). This platform could include several digital tools that could enable citizens to participate in the process, starting from the proposals' format to a system to discuss all the presented projects. Thus, allowing each citizen, digitally identified (De Cindio, 2012), the opportunity to access and participate in the decision-making process, this model could engage targeted females from the planning to the determination of the budget.

The single and open participatory budget governance platform can act as an aggregator of the various digital tools available to safeguard women interests, such as digital reviews, focus groups, opinion polls, interviews, internet voting, online evaluation and monitoring. The outputs of these participatory tools can be translated into periodic reports that can be updated and optimized by the continuous feedback flow coming from the citizens, who detect the actual trend of citizen satisfaction and, consequently, of the GB effectiveness. This enables to settle and improve ongoing and *ex-post* in terms of corrective auditing.

An embryo example of this digital procedure has been already discussed in Italy by the Chamber of Deputies. In regulating the representation of interests, the Italian institutions are planning to establish an online platform for each administration where it is possible to launch a consultation procedure on the legislative and/or regulatory act of interest, welcoming the participation of a pre-selected list of legitimized stakeholders. This is done for several purposes: (i) to improve the participation of the various stakeholders in the process of making public decisions; (ii) to ensure the transparency of the processes; and (iii) to allow the acquisition, by public decision-makers, of a broader information base on which to base informed choices. A univocal consultation platform, collector of the various activities, could constitute the fundamental reform for fostering the citizens' participation in public gender budgeting. This platform would intervene in defining policies from its initial phase and evaluating the actual availability of the necessary resources, avoiding any possibility of system fragmentation and parcelling.

The centrality of gender budgeting is made more efficient by exploiting the completeness of information deriving from the application of a specific platform, which would allow the greater participation of the most discriminated

groups through the inclusion of mechanisms that avoid the inequality of power and gender. To guarantee more involvement of the various socio-economic actors in the procedures for defining public policies, favouring a greater democracy and improving the quality of regulation, it is essential that the digitization activities of the "open and participatory budget governance" are well-managed. Digitalization must be led concretely, bringing added value to the community and the public decision-maker, avoiding an unjustified techno-optimism (Vydra & Klievink, 2019), but trying to create a space for discussion and debates (Sønderskov, Rønning & Magnussen, 2021). Doing this would benefit from the positive effects derived from opening up to dialogue with stakeholders to improve the system.

Public administrations must regulate decision-making processes, making them transparent and ensuring reciprocity and balance between rights and duties. In this regard, it is worth highlighting how the active participation of citizens should be balanced by a system of rights and duties. There must also be some duties for the public administrations in responding to the inputs coming from the citizenship. They should be monitored through controls and should provide for sanctions for the subjects involved in non-response and/or non-compliance with gender principles. Furthermore, it would be helpful to insert a voluntary and incentive/reward mechanism not only for citizens' participation in public affairs but also for the public administration such as, e.g., differentiated/privileged level of access to information, "quality mark" to open participation to citizens themselves. The regulation must make transparency "convenient", recognizing some benefits to those who are eligible to be registered on the platform.

All the macro-phases and sub-phases analyzed are necessary and fundamental to achieve the desired objectives because, without good planning, any development effort would be in vain; without a skilled and efficient implementation of the budget, the process could be considered worthless. Finally, without a monitoring process, the implementation phase would not maintain high standards of accountability towards citizens.

With these conclusions, this work demonstrates how concepts, that result in the practice still in a primordial phase, could be implemented by local administrations in accordance with the laws, respect for gender equality and in a perspective of technological renewal. Starting from the small realities, passing through the cities and finishing to the regions, it is possible to achieve a fundamental, impartial, equitable, technological and no longer so utopian goal, moving away from that neutral conception of the gender budget to a new GB model, useful to the advancement towards equality, through the allocation of public resources.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, it is evident how restyling public budgeting can contribute to the efficiency of the decision-making process of policies. Thanks to the advent of digitalization tools, it can experiment with new frontiers in supporting the better weighing between the effectiveness of public decision-making and greater inclusiveness. Indeed, thanks to the application of a model such as the one proposed, it would be possible to bring women from a position of weak stakeholders (marginal, with high interest but low influence) to a position of essential stakeholders (key people, with high interest and strong influence). However, this must not be undertaken as a weakening or downsizing of the institutions since the civil development, social cohesion and administrative improvement deriving from participatory budgeting represent a fundamental tool for inclusion and the public administrations' increase in authority.

Moreover, it is essential that citizens' active participation is encouraged along each step of the GB digitalization, namely the analysis of the socio-economic context, the preliminary analysis of indicators, the analysis of policies and programs in the primary and secondary sectors, the reclassification of the budget according to gender and the analysis of personnel, the analysis of the activity of the organization and the use of indicators. This will instil greater confidence in the participatory process by ensuring that the E of gender equity can be combined with the 3 "Es" of economy, effectiveness and efficiency to evaluate the implementation of public administration performance. Finally, it can be stated that, given its centrality, the budget will be able to connect equality goal with macroeconomic policy, exploiting new technologies able to strengthen and influence the various decision-makers.

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