The Economist

Making women count

Why governments should introduce gender budgeting

Sexual equality makes economic sense; governments should measure it and budgets promote it

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IT IS easy to be cynical about government—and rarely does such cynicism go unrewarded. Take, for instance, policy towards women. Some politicians declare that they value women's unique role, which can be shorthand for keeping married women at home looking after the kids. Others create whole ministries devoted to policies for women, which can be a device for parking women's issues on the periphery of policy where they cannot do any harm. Still others, who may actually mean what they say, pass laws giving women equal opportunities to men. Yet decreeing an end to discrimination is very different from bringing it about.

Amid this tangle of evasion, half-promises and wishful thinking, some policymakers have embraced a technique called gender budgeting. It not only promises to do a lot of good for women, but carries a lesson for advocates of any cause: the way to a government's heart is through its pocket.

did, that the numbers show how lowering income tax on second earners will encourage women to join the labour force, boosting growth and tax revenues. Or that cuts to programmes designed to reduce domestic violence would be a false economy, because they would cost so much in medical treatment and lost workdays.

As well as identifying opportunities and errors, gender budgeting brings women's issues right to the heart of government, the ministry of finance. Governments routinely bat away sensible policies that lack a champion when the money is handed out. But if judgments about what makes sense for women (and the general good) are being formed within the finance ministry itself, then the battle is half-won.

Gender budgeting is not new. Feminist economists have argued for it since the 1980s. A few countries, such as Australia and South Africa, took it up, though efforts waxed and waned with shifts in political leadership—it is seen as left-wing and anti-austerity. The Nordic countries were pioneers in the West; Sweden, with its self-declared "feminist government", may be the gold standard. Now, egged on by the World Bank, the UN and the IMF, more governments are taking an interest. They should sign on as the results are worth having.

Partly because South Korea invested little in social care, women had to choose between having children, which lowers labour-force participation, or remaining childless, which reduces the country's fertility rate. Gender budgeting showed how, with an ageing population, the country gained from spending on care. Rwanda found that investment in clean water not only curbed disease but also freed up girls, who used to fetch the stuff, to go to school. Ample research confirms that leaving half a country's people behind is bad for growth. Violence against women; failing to educate girls properly; unequal pay and access to jobs: all take an economic toll.

Inevitably there are difficulties. Dividing a policy's costs and benefits between men and women can be hard. Sometimes, as with lost hours of school, the costs have to be estimated.