

# United Kingdom: A Focus on taxes and benefits

*Donna St. Hill*

Table 14: Selected Indicators for the UK

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number</i>
Population	2000	59.8
% of population which is female	2001	51%
% of population which is urban (England & Wales)	2001	79%
Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (US\$)	1999	22,897
Human development index (HDI)	1999	0.923
Gender development index (GDI)	1999	0.920
% of total budget funded by donors	2002	0%
% of national parliamentarians who are women	2001	17.9%

## Introduction

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) in the United Kingdom (UK) refers to itself as a think tank on the relationship between women, men and economics. It brings together independent feminists, economists and social policy experts with others from a range of equality-seeking non-governmental organisations (NGOs), unions and research organisations. Members represent their own views, which are informed by their specialist work as researchers on gender and social policy, as trade unionists and as public economists, as well as by their and their organisation's experience in the field of advocacy and public policy.

The work and the achievements of the WBG have reached a new prominence since the coming to power of a New Labour government in 1997. The change from Conservative to the centre-left political administration of the New Labour Party facilitated not only a more sympathetic political directorate in Westminster, but also what appears to be a more genuinely open agenda, including paying attention to the voices of women.

Because of this, the fortunes of New Labour and the WBG have so far been positively intertwined. Listening to women's representatives is part of a general policy of the UK Government to consult more widely with stakeholders prior to formulating policy. As a result, the WBG has expanded its advocacy capabilities from commenting on the budget after it is released to engaging in a two-way dialogue with Treasury before the budget is developed. It has also engaged throughout the year in a range of gender-relevant policy issues with a small number of key government departments, such as Social Security, Work and Pensions and the Inland Revenue.

The institutional capacity of the WBG was greatly enhanced in the fall of 1999 with the grant from the Barrow Cadbury Trust to fund the salary of a part-time project manager. At that time Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme provided an additional grant to finance publishing and special projects should the need arise. The human resource boost enabled a more sustained outreach and a fuller programme of official activities among key government departments as well as the coordination of the voluntary labour of WBG members and interns to prepare for and participate in government meetings. The extra, dedicated resources on a consistent basis also led to the launch of the WBG's first website, the establishment of a media presence, and a significant expansion of membership.

This chapter traces the issues and opportunities facing the development of the WBG in the UK and its work to make economic policy making reflect women's perspectives and priorities. The first section looks at its history, paying particular attention to how different governing philosophies of government administrations have influenced the nature of gender budgeting in the UK. The following section examines the current budgetary process in the UK and the ways in which the WBG has been able to utilise particular administrative and political changes as useful leverage for persuading government to deliver on the gender agenda. The strengths and subsequent successes of the WBG's experience are discussed in the next two sections. After an assessment of some of the practical and strategic challenges at the present stage of development, the chapter concludes with a brief look at some of the future opportunities for promoting gender budgeting within the UK.

## History of the WBG

The WBG was established in 1989 when a number of feminist women, mainly academics, got together to discuss the implications of the relationship between gender relations and macro economic policy. In the course of its development, a few men have expressed interest in membership, but their contributions have so far been limited.

For the first eight years of WBG's existence, members met as an informal group to comment on the UK budget on an annual basis. However, throughout this period the Conservative government then in power did not see the need to entertain its critique of budgetary policies. The WBG therefore found itself producing commentaries on the budgets after they were announced with no acknowledgement from government. Media attention was also minimal despite an invitation in one year from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to be part of its live commentary of the budget. Overall, during the Conservative years, WBG's main work with politicians involved providing briefing papers for opposition parties to criticise successive government budgets.

With the change of government to New Labour in 1997, both the extent and the form of engagement with the budgetary process changed dramatically. Some months after the general election, and with the help of the Cabinet Office's Women and Equality Unit (WEU), the WBG attended its first exploratory meeting with the Treasury. The WBG now has regular meetings with the Treasury. It meets pre- and post-budget, but also in a series of policy seminars and roundtable meetings on a range of policy issues, some of which it introduces.

Recently, the WBG has cemented functional linkages with the Cabinet Office through the WEU and the Women's National Commission (WNC) by collaborating in, and often leading, intellectual arguments for policy changes on a number of longstanding women's issues. The WEU is the UK Government's unit for commissioning and assembling research and data on women. The WNC, which is also in the Cabinet Office, is an agency set up by the government to give women a voice in Westminster. The issues collaborated on include the importance of a policy focus on the individual as well as on the household or family; consideration of the long-term gender effects of policy; the incorporation of the unpaid, care economy in national accounting systems; closing the gender, productivity and pay gaps; and the

differential responses between men and women to economic incentives.

These relationships with the Cabinet Office have proved invaluable for raising the WBG's profile and gaining access to high-ranking government officials. They have also resulted in an enhancement of the specialist capacity of women-focused state units such as the WEU and the WNC in the areas of gender analysis and economic literacy for female empowerment.

The WBG has benefited especially from its close links with the WNC. The relationship has provided it with considerable access to senior government officials, including government ministers, for private meetings and consultations. It is also of significant value that the Director of the WNC is committed to the ideals of the Group and is exceptionally well versed in political diplomacy and the policy-making processes within government. In the beginning, meetings with government officials occurred only after the WNC Director had written letters or made phone calls to senior civil service colleagues introducing the idea of gender analysis and explaining how this might benefit their different policy agendas. Now, however, policy makers keen on examining how a gender perspective on their policy formulations would be beneficial are approaching the WBG at a faster rate than the Group's existing capacity to respond effectively.

However, while being an independent body that is able to scrutinise policy for unacknowledged gender effects has its advantages, there are also substantial limitations to how far the WBG can go, as an external organisation, in taking forward gender budget work. This is an issue we will return to later.

In October 2001, with a new public profile in Westminster, greater awareness of its activities nationally and internationally, and a growing media presence creating heightened expectations, the WBG met to reconsider its strategic future. At the end of the meeting the Group had its first formalised, multi-part description of itself. In particular, the document stated that the aims and goals of the WBG were to:

- ◆ develop analysis and lead debate on the gender implications of economic policy, bearing in mind the multiple dimensions of women's disadvantage;
- ◆ expand understanding among policy makers and opinion formers of the gender implications of economic policy and give policy advice;

- ◆ promote gender mainstreaming in economic policy making, presentation and monitoring; and
- ◆ work with other organisations to raise public awareness of gender equality issues in economic policy and the importance of assessing the effects of economic policy on women.

## The Budgetary Process in the UK

### An annual statement of taxes and benefits

The budgetary process in the UK is somewhat different from other countries and this has shaped the nature of the WBG's relationship with the Treasury. It influences both the range of issues on which the WBG engages the government and also the focus of discussions.

Within the UK budgetary process, there is a biennial Spending Review which sets government spending for the departments for the next budgetary year along with projected spending for the following three budgetary years. In these aspects the process is similar to that in other countries. However, the UK budget itself is the annual statement of changes in taxes and benefits and the regulations relating to them, rather than the statement on revenue and expenditures common in other countries. On Budget day the Chancellor concentrates on revenue-raising measures and only broadly outlines departmental expenditure plans. In the days following the Spending Review, individual departments announce the details of spending and policy reforms, usually in media conferences.

The WBG has concentrated on taxes and benefits rather than the specific gendered effects of government expenditure as most other gender budget initiatives do. However, it is encouraging the government to commit itself to this annual exercise on all forms of taxation as well as expenditure. This is an area that will require more lobbying in order to move from a situation in which government invites critical gender analysis to where it performs this function itself.

A practical reason why the WBG has focused its efforts on taxes and benefits is that there are fewer of them than there are spending programmes. Further, many of the taxes and benefits apply to individuals, making gender effects more easily identifiable (Himmelweit, 2000: 6). However, while even small changes to these policies may end up having a huge impact on a government's entire

economic strategy, they are notoriously difficult to lobby on. The difficulties arise principally because of entrenched gender assumptions that underpin economic analysis. Challenging these means putting the analytical spotlight on precisely those areas which economists have been trained not to see. Accepting the full implications of gender analysis for economic policy is therefore inherently revolutionary for economists as well as for the women who will come into contact with truly engendered policy reform. The fact that tax and benefit instruments can be bearers of profound gender bias only becomes clear when analysts expose the philosophical principles at work in the relationship between one tax and another. Welfare to work policies that contain inadequate or no child-care provision, the payment of tax incentives and benefits to the sole earner in households on the assumption of joint use of family income, and state benefit systems that rely on the 'typical' or 'normal' working life are some examples of these systemic gender biases.

### Key principles for assessing gender impact

In terms of methodology, the WBG has advised the government to employ five key principles in assessing the impact of budgetary measures.

1. Analytical attention needs to be paid to both the individual and the family. If gender effects are to be seen clearly and factored into policy planning, it is essential to understand the distinct impacts of budgets at the individual and household level.
2. The long-term effects of policy need to be considered. Some of the most important goals of government policy relate to human development and balancing the division of paid and unpaid work between states, communities and families. These involve social transformations that take place slowly over decades, perhaps even generations. Therefore, policy designed today must consider its impact on the achievement of valued long-term societal goals with a view to making short-term changes supportive of long-term stability and goals.
3. Analysis needs to be extended to factors such as employment, poverty, education and the unpaid, care economy. The continuing impact of unpaid care work on women's employment, poverty rates and participation in all forms of public life must be addressed

by policy makers if they are to realise the full potential of policy reform in these areas.

4. It needs to be understood that men and women's different and unequal positioning gives rise to different, gendered responses to economic incentives. Simplistic models of economic behaviour need to be replaced by more sophisticated modelling that takes into account the trade-offs between paid and unpaid work and the opportunity costs for men and women of participating in each sphere.
5. Finally, the ways in which policy challenges or entrenches gender stereotypes need careful examination. Measures to foster interchangeable practices between men and women's participation in paid work and the unpaid care economy is central not only to the economic potential of women, but also to the full human development of men.

### Recommended methods for gender analysis

There are a number of ways in which government can be advised to carry out gender analysis as part of its budgetary process. The table below outlines five methods that the WBG advocates for inserting gender analysis into the budget. The methods range from fairly simple to more complex techniques.

Table 15: Tools for introducing gender analysis into the UK budgetary process

	<i>Questions explored</i>	<i>Requirements</i>
1. Making gender visible	Who are the recipients?	Data disaggregated by sex
2. Auditing revenue and expenditure	How is spending/revenue distributed between women and men?	Expenditure and revenue statistics disaggregated by sex
3. Gender impact assessment	What are implications in the short and long term for the gender distribution of: – resources (money and time)? – paid and unpaid work?	Data on the unpaid, caring economy, for example, a satellite account incorporating time use data

	<p>Is provision adequate to the needs of women and men?</p> <p>How does policy affect gender norms and roles?</p>	<p>Micro-analytic model of income distribution, incorporating model of economic (e.g. labour supply) and other (e.g. fertility) behaviour sensitive to gender differentials</p> <p>Sensitivity to gender segregation, cultural practices and gender norms and the impact that policy has on supporting or reconstructing these.</p>
4. Gender mainstreaming	<p>How is gender taken into account in policy formulation, design and implementation?</p> <p>What priorities are given to reducing gender inequality?</p>	<p>Cooperation across government agencies and across the policy process</p> <p>Awareness of the scope of gender issues and ability to search out more hidden aspects of gender inequality</p> <p>Tools to assess the aims and priorities attached to policy</p>
5. Benchmarking	<p>Are specific targets for gender equality being met?</p>	<p>Awareness of complexity of gender inequalities when setting targets</p> <p>Ability to locate the policy and other influences on particular social phenomena</p>

Source: Rake, 2002: 10

The first method requires a statistical reckoning of the numbers of men and women affected by a particular policy. This depends on the availability of national data sets disaggregated by gender. Making this exercise more meaningful requires gender analysis of men's and women's status and needs as well as the ways in which the policy will affect economic behaviour over the long-term.

The second level of analysis is an audit of the incidence of revenue and expenditure. The value of this exercise lies in revealing any systemic bias in policy design that results in one gender bearing an inequitably disproportionate burden or benefit from the policy. To demonstrate this point, the WBG carried out a gender analysis of one of government's flagship programmes for getting people off welfare and into work. The analysis of the New Deal programmes showed the ways in which budgetary allocations for females were significantly below those utilised by males because of erroneous and unquestioned assumptions about the needs and preferences of women and men. The argument highlighted the ways in which the assumptions of male breadwinners and stable families ran through the New Deal policies. The result was a further expansion of gender gaps between the unemployed as policy failed to keep pace with the changes in women's and men's lives. The critique also offered concrete proposals for reform in a wide range of areas. These included getting rid of the disincentive for second earners and lessening the length of unemployment required for eligibility.

The patterns of resource allocation that benefit-incidence data throw up can reveal government priorities and the emphasis government places on men or women's equitable participation in the economy. This is what is entailed in the third approach of gender impact assessment. The real issue is not just how much money is spent on women in pension and social assistance benefits (or how much taxed from men), but whether or not spending matches women's and men's needs. This requires that policy makers operate with a more sophisticated understanding of the implications of gender differentials for policy in order to conduct a gender analysis of the budget. To truly understand the implications of the data requires even more sophisticated data and analysis. For instance, the availability of time use data for the development of a satellite account of unpaid work is extremely useful in assessing the impact of the budget on the unpaid, care sector.

One well-known example of the potential misreading of government expenditure occurs in the health sector, where females consume by far the largest amount of resources. A straight reading of the numbers seems to support the thesis of male marginalisation. The issue is, however, clearly not so simple as women have more, and often different, needs from men given, in particular, their reproductive role. The absence of a health economist in the WBG has been the main

reason why this issue has not been taken on in more targeted way. However, WBG members use this example in other non-health related discussions with ministers and officials, because health is probably the most glaring case of false conclusions being reached on the basis of sex-disaggregated data.

Gender mainstreaming is the next approach. Rather than a form of analysis, gender mainstreaming represents a broader set of activities with a broader set of goals. Gender mainstreaming refers to the implementation of a gender-sensitive perspective throughout the policy process and in all policy areas. The implementation of gender mainstreaming throughout the entire government machinery is an indication of an acceptance that gender analysis is not just a responsibility for women's or gender machineries, but rather that gender equality is a priority for government as a whole. Although one of the most readily grasped concepts, gender mainstreaming is turning out to be one of the most often cited works-in-progress but least implemented types of gender-sensitive bureaucratic practice.

Prior to the 2001 restructuring, the Women's Unit had the responsibility, through its championing government minister, for implementing the gender mainstreaming project throughout central government. During that period, the Women's Unit worked closely with the WBG on delivering on this central mandate. With the 2001 cabinet changes and restructuring of the former Women's Unit to the new WEU, this task no longer rests with the WEU's cabinet minister. It has now become diffused as a task of all government ministers. The absence of direct ministerial accountability and the loss of a dedicated unit within government to push the process through Westminster, combined with varying levels of understanding of the project among government departments, makes this a crucial area on which the WBG will need to think creatively. For now, it is raising the issue of gender mainstreaming with the small number of individual government departments with whom it has regular contact on other policy concerns.

The fifth type of analysis is benchmarking, which may also be incorporated into any of the previous four methodologies. Benchmarking establishes a minimum standard and a time frame over which it can realistically be achieved. In benchmarking for poverty, for example, it is necessary to enquire about specific targets for women as well as for groups of women who are additionally deprived, such as old age pensioners and ethnic minority women. The UK government has

already set itself some benchmarks, for example in the area of women's participation in public life. However, in the areas in which the WBG is most interested, the government continues to listen to, but not to act on, the Group's regular call for benchmarks for reducing the pay gap, for the productivity gap and for the development of a national child-care strategy.

Separating out the various methods for carrying out gender analysis helps in achieving clarity on the division between activities which can be spearheaded by external groups like the WBG and those which are the exclusive terrain of governments. For example, only governments can implement gender mainstreaming across the public sector, even though external groups can create pressure by monitoring progress and outcomes.

## Strengths of the WBG

The strengths of the WBG are in some ways unique among gender-responsive budget (GRB) initiatives. The dominance of professional economists who can speak to public sector officials in economic language is a definite advantage that sets the WBG's work apart from most other initiatives. There is also a cadre of feminist social policy analysts and gender experts from unions, research institutions and other independent equality-seeking organisations who can translate difficult concepts into the pragmatic, jargon-filled language of 'public sector speak'. The current administration's emphasis on evidence-based policy analysis makes it more welcoming of the research and scholarly orientation of the WBG than previous governments. The fact that gender budgeting, and to some extent gender analysis, are new areas to policy makers, puts the WBG, as the leading practitioner in the field in England, at a substantial advantage.

In targeting its slim resources at the Treasury, the central government organ responsible for macroeconomic planning, the WBG has been able to build up a close working relationship with senior Treasury officials and ministers. This relationship might not have been as strong if the Group had attempted to influence government through many departments at once. The close relationship has meant that the WBG has also been able to fine-tune its strategy over time, due to increasing familiarity with Treasury officials' ways of working. It has thus concentrated its efforts on engendering the Treasury's policy agenda by using the government's willingness to take on the instrumental ways in

which gender analysis could improve the efficiency of its already stated policies.

The value of the presence of a large body of knowledgeable, committed feminists who are ready to give freely of their expertise and time to the WBG's work cannot be underestimated. The fact that they provide these skills largely at their own expense is a factor not recognised by government departments who benefit from their advice. However, paid or unpaid, the WBG appears highly valued by government officials, especially by those in the Treasury, if the level of contact and consultation is anything to go by.

## Successes Achieved by the WBG

After several years of irregular contact and reactive annual responses to the Pre Budget Report, which is an advance statement of the government's budgetary intentions, the WBG now enjoys privileged, sustained access to Treasury officials. This access to the research, analysis and policy-making process within the Treasury provides the space for a pro-active series of seminars and workshops that explicitly take gender perspectives into account. The shift is in large part due to the stance of Tony Blair's New Labour government.

The new currency of women's equality in political circles is greatly facilitated by New Labour's modernisation agenda for government in which policy reform, emphasising greater participation, transparency and accountability, plays a major role. This emphasis on consulting with policy communities outside government is useful for the WBG's engagement. However, there are some concerns among social activists that this appearance of openness may actually conceal the more important continuities where policy decisions are, in the main, still made by a policy elite with its own pre-determined agenda. The WBG is very aware of this possibility even while it capitalises on the Blair government's new practice of participatory government. As former Chair of the WBG, Sue Himmelweit, puts it, there is a danger that the WBG's advice could be used to pre-empt criticism by improving presentation alone rather than having any substantive gender equality impact on policy itself (Himmelweit, 2000: 4).

The government's commitment to greater participation and transparency in its policy-making process has allowed pressure groups other than the WBG to access the budgetary process for the first time.

This has created opportunities to work with, and to some extent influence, other social policy lobbying organisations it would not ordinarily have come into contact with.

Because of the new openness within government around public consultation, the budgetary calendar has been changed. Since 1997, in addition to the opportunity offered by the Pre Budget Report to critique the government statement of intent, there is now also a longer window period in which to see ministers and officials as well as collaborate with like-minded NGOs. This budget deliberation period has allowed the WBG to collaborate more closely with trade unions, poverty action groups and pensions activists to reinforce the positions that the Group will champion. So far, there have been no major conflicts of interest. On the contrary, there has been a lot of sharing of research and coalition building with other organisations such as the leading trade unions.

In 2001 the WBG became involved for the first time in the important negotiations that preceded the Treasury-led Government Spending Review of summer 2002. This review sets out the government's spending aims for the next three years. The involvement of the Group is important. Budget day is met each year with enormous public and media attention while little attention is usually paid to the 'spending round' when it is announced later in the year. However, because governments tend to put money where their priorities are, the adoption of at least a limited gender analysis in parts of the Spending Review can have far-reaching implications for women where cuts have been suggested.

Since the 1997 election the WBG has been able to capture and hold the attention of economic planners by adopting an instrumental approach to getting gender analysis into the Treasury's ways of working. It has done this by developing a gender analysis of government's stated overriding objectives, such as raising labour force productivity, reducing child poverty and reducing welfare rolls by getting 'workless households' into work. In so doing, it is among the few advocacy groups in the UK that can advance an economic argument about efficiency of spending through the incorporation of equality analysis. There is currently no other equality lobbying or advocacy group in Britain which has successfully put an economic case for its interests before government in this way. As such, the WBG is uniquely positioned to advance economic arguments for equality more generally.

The WBG has some successes to show for its work. A major policy win, announced by Chancellor Gordon Brown in the March 2002 Budget, is that from 2003 the new Child Tax Credit (CTC) will be paid to the main carer, who is almost always a woman, rather than to the main earner, who is almost always a man. The use of efficiency grounds for transferring income from the male 'wallet' to the female 'purse' was successful because the Treasury accepted the WBG's evidence that money under women's control had a greater positive influence on child well-being and therefore on the reduction of child poverty, an important government goal. There is a danger, however, in the fact that this policy change was primarily influenced by evidence of the value of this shift in household finances for children, rather than on equity grounds for women.

After more than a decade of public obscurity, the momentum achieved with UK gender budgeting initiatives since 2000 has resulted in a heightened media presence. The WBG's official response to the Pre Budget Report of November 2000 was carried in national newspapers, including the highly regarded *Financial Times*. There was also a television interview and several follow-up radio backgrounders and newspaper quotes from the Group's budget night news release.

This media interest may have also translated into greater awareness of the WBG's work within other central government departments with whom it has had no direct contact, and among women's equality actors more generally, as there has been a sudden upsurge in requests for WBG input as speakers, seminar participants and in public sector consultations. The awareness of the WBG's work among audiences other than the Treasury, especially women's groups, is important as media engagements are one of the few ways that the Group is able to communicate gender budgeting arguments to women's leaders and grassroots activists without incurring huge communication costs.

## Continuing Challenges

### Overcoming the limitations of the UK's parliamentary system

While establishing close relationships with a handful of key government departments has facilitated a more meaningful, constructive engagement, the overall party political context has meant that the WBG is sometimes unable to take a sufficiently critical stance

in the public arena. The cordial working relationship between the WBG and the present government can be traced back to the Group's collaboration with New Labour when it was the official opposition. Throughout that early relationship, left-leaning New Labour shadow ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs) found the WBG critique of right-wing Conservative policies to be invaluable in the party's efforts to prove the Tories were out of touch with the British people.

Much of that history still characterises the WBG/New Labour relationship today. The problem which arises is a common one in the transition from opposition to government, namely that parties are more suggestible to radical, new ideas before coming into political office than during incumbency. On the other hand, there are very few Conservative MPs who are willing to support even the most basic WBG principles publicly. It is thus no longer able to mobilise opposition support in its efforts to influence government. This dilemma is perhaps a limitation of the British parliamentary system, in which the two main parties occupy opposite ideological positions on women's empowerment, but with insufficient, organised internal cleavages, especially among the Conservatives, to allow the WBG to continue to gain political capital by exploiting political differences.

### Involving more women in macroeconomic processes

The status quo in Britain remains that women are largely absent from macroeconomic policy discussions. The fact that the WBG is not yet engaging in a two-way dialogue with grassroots women's NGOs presents an obstacle to widespread participation in, and scrutiny of, the macroeconomic processes by women more generally. At present the policy dialogue occurs primarily among industry specialists and government gender equality officials rather than among and on behalf of a variety of women's interests. The WBG has, however, maintained a close relationship with its equivalent number in Scotland, Engender Women's Budget Group (EWBG), which is somewhat more expansive in the constitution of its membership.

Much of the explanation for the limited engagement with wider groupings of women lies in the WBG's origins and composition, in that it has drawn heavily from academic and other research and policy environments. But it also has to do with a shortage of time and money to engage productively with women's groups around the country. The lack of engagement is becoming more and more untenable as funders

begin to demand that its ways of working both reflect the participation of grassroots women's movements as well as produce outcomes that are of practical use to women's organisation working at the local levels in communities, neighbourhoods and sectors. It may take some time for the WBG's membership to view the political participation concerns of funders as central. However, the issue is one to which the WBG management committee is already responding positively.

Beyond the women's organisations generally, there is another group of women whose needs are not prioritised within the WBG's work. However, in this case there is no compelling external pressure to include their interests. Black and Asian women's gender equality politics are overwhelmingly concentrated in grassroots and informal organisations. As such they view their daily struggles against racist and sexist local institutions in Britain as the beginning and end of their organising. Yet, when viewed through a gendered lens on macroeconomics, their experiences put them at the sharp end of almost all the issues the WBG wants government to take seriously in terms of policy reforms to speed up gender equality.

Beyond the WBG, the neglect of ethnic minority women's economic interests has been a longstanding feature of the male-dominated government Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and other ethnic minority pressure groups. Because their issues are taken seriously by neither the official state gender and race equality organisations, nor the prominent non-governmental women's equality organisations, black and Asian women find they have neither a say nor a place in macroeconomic policy-making. Yet the statistics on their gendered experiences of poverty, unemployment, underemployment, harassment, low pay and work-life balance (CRE, 2001) suggest black and Asian women are urgent priorities for both the gender equality and race equality mandates at the national level. It is difficult to say whether, without pressure from funders, the WBG will interpret black and Asian's women's interests as among the ones for which they can effectively lobby government.

### Taking a less academic approach to lobbying

A weakness arising from the dominance of academics in the WBG is that the policy implications arising from their gender analysis may be rigorous but are not always politically astute. This is demonstrated by the fact that, although most of its successes have been as a result of an

instrumental use of gender analysis, it has been unable as yet to come up with creative ways to lead and shape the policy agenda in women's interests. One example is in getting the CTC paid to mothers on the grounds that the transfer of income to women's control would facilitate the government's stated goal of reducing child poverty rather than on grounds of gender equity. The achievement of particular outcomes in policy reform needs to be assessed against the 'why' as well as the 'what' of the reform achieved. If the feminist intent of the 'why' in policy change has been side-stepped, this can have long-term negative effects for women.

This is not to deny that many women's movements world-wide have found that instrumentalism is a useful tactic for getting policies reformed in women's favour as an *initial* strategy. However, the next part of the strategy, the subversion of entrenched gender bias among government planners by introducing normative gender analysis, is the phase that the WBG, like many feminist advocates elsewhere, struggles with (Rake, 2002: 15).

Another limitation of an academic orientation to lobbying is that many policy makers regard academics as pursuing 'ivory tower' agendas that are out of touch with the electorate of either sex. Thus, while their university and research backgrounds put the WBG in a good position technically to argue cogently for policy reforms in a way that many women's representatives would be unable to, this very strength poses limitations to the wholehearted embrace of gender reforms advocated by the Group among politicians and UK women more generally. The WBG therefore has to contend with both the common-sense scepticism of gender experts on the part of some policy elites inside government as detached theoreticians with little real-world experience, and more general anti-intellectual sentiments coming from some parts of the gender equality movement.

These problems – of non-engagement with grassroots women's groups, lobbying on white-dominated political-economic interests, and academic dominance – all have an organisational genesis. Rather than being the result of considered action on the part of the WBG, it is more plausible that they emerge from institutional constraints and inertia. Nevertheless, the fact that the WBG is seen as speaking to government for 'women', while most of the Group's constituents are not in a position to do so themselves, presents an issue of accountability since the mainly word-of-mouth membership recruitment tends to replicate the existing profile. Recently, the WBG has been revisiting its

organisational strategy in light of its growing public visibility and the acknowledgement of an absence of democratic accountability in the constitution of its leadership, membership and the priorities it takes up with government on women's behalf. The strategy planning exercise in 2001 has already identified ways of surmounting some of these challenges and initiatives should soon be in place to address them.

### Accessing increased funding

Funding is a more concrete limitation for the WBG. However, as we have noted, it has managed to gain a degree of access to policy makers that belies its institutional capacity. Although money has been scarce, it has managed to sustain an impressive programme of work and influence which reflects the goodwill earned in recent years. Regular activities include meetings with government ministers and officials, a series of parliamentary seminars, policy seminars for Treasury officials, and a host of official responses to government requests for consultation, among other activities. This is largely possible because the central players, as well as staff, contribute generously in unpaid labour when extra resources are required. There is an irony in the fact that it is only through almost unlimited supplies of feminists' unpaid work that an appreciation of the value of women's labour is slowly being recognised by Treasury officials, even if they have not yet started to reflect this awareness in economic policy across the board.

In light of this, there has been some consideration within the WBG of offsetting members' direct costs of lobbying – travel, publication and presentation materials – by charging government departments for expenses incurred. However, the outcome of this debate is, as yet, inconclusive. Expanding its base of core and project funders is a more readily agreed route to increasing its financial resources that the WBG has been actively pursuing since 2001.

### Moving from words to action

The institutional strengths and challenges discussed so far have been ones that arise as a result of the particular origins, constitution, and feminist evolution of the WBG. However, the main challenges facing its work are likely to be identical to those faced by the women's movement internationally. The Group has been unable as yet to have a significant influence in getting government departments to move any closer to gender mainstreaming than what is called in the UK a

'ticked-box' approach. The public sector consensus seems to be that just mentioning the aspiration to implement gender mainstreaming is adequate proof of the state's commitment. Added to this, following a Cabinet reshuffle in 2001 and the reconfiguration of ministerial responsibilities, there is no longer direct accountability within government for benchmarks, targets or any other measure of the output of the mainstreaming process. This is a strategic issue that the WBG has done less lobbying on as the demand for its input has tended to be fairly policy-specific and driven by government demands and priorities.

Government may have embraced the idea that, if state practices are to be seen to be open and participatory, they need to include women. Further, they need to do so especially in areas where traditionally women have had little or no input into government policy and the decision-making processes of the state apparatus. Government has not yet got the message, however, that if they truly listen to women, they will need to institutionalise formal, sustained measures for conducting gender analyses of all policies and administrative processes. In other words, a sign that they have taken seriously the consultative voices of women's organisations like the WBG would be their getting down to the business of instituting an accountable gender mainstreaming system throughout the entire span of government business.

One of the major aims of the WBG has been to persuade government to produce a gender impact analysis of its revenue and expenditure. However, it has not been able to convince the Treasury or any other government departments of the need to do a gender audit of expenditure. This may be related to the lack of a dialogue with grassroots women's groups who typically put women's issues on the parliamentary agenda by pressuring MPs directly. Grassroots activists' emphasis on targeting MPs can create a political impetus for change rather than a purely bureaucratic one. WBG's contact with the policy-making process has largely been with senior public officials and a number of ministers by raising concerns relevant to their policy portfolios. Both points of emphasis are important, but could advance the gender agenda better if more cohesively pursued.

Another consideration is that the idea of gender audits or even gender mainstreaming is still not widely enough accepted among women's groups for it to become a cause around which they create political pressure. In the WBG's work on gender budgeting to date, much attention is understandably directed at the economic planners

themselves. But public sector success in mainstreaming gender will depend in part on the capacities of stakeholders inside and outside the government sector to provide the oversight that supports them in, and commits them to, this task (St. Hill, 2001: 16). Perhaps, for all these reasons, future engagement with a wide cross section of UK women's groups will create a useful amalgamation of political activism and expert advocacy for the urgent application of these two crucial tools of gender analysis.

A more foundational challenge is to get the UK government to go beyond a half-hearted acknowledgement of the existence of vast quantities of women's unpaid labour, to creating social policies and economic incentives that recognise the value of this work and the importance of its redistribution between men and women, family and society. At present, this seems incompatible with the government's continuing emphasis on paid work as the major thrust of its welfare reform. Because the spending reductions at the heart of government welfare reforms are more concerned with reducing taxation and public expenditure than with gender equity, government is unlikely to relieve women of some of their care work by the general extension of public services or more generous benefits for the most vulnerable groups of women. The WBG has made strong representations on this score in the past and will no doubt continue to do so in the future. Already, government is beginning to pay at least lip service to these assertions by acknowledging women's double day in some of its official publications. There may be some room for optimism that, in terms of policy reform, rhetoric is preceding reality.

## Future Opportunities

Despite a range of challenges, the future of the WBG in the UK looks bright. In conclusion, all that remains is to touch on some of the opportunities that exist at present and others which are unfolding.

The WBG is currently evolving to where leadership of the national debate on gender and government policy is not only desirable but essential if its work is to be used to further an understanding of female empowerment as an end in itself and not just a means to macro-economic goals decided on by government in isolation from women. To facilitate greater utilisation by government of gender analysis within its current frameworks will be no easy task as it will require external monitoring, internal capacity building, political will and considerable

public resources. Increased levels of funding from a broader base of donors, coupled with a focus on the recent statement of intent to lead the national conversation on gender and macro-economic policy, should set the WBG well on the way to realising its potential.

In terms of the constant bugbear of funding, there are signs that many ethically minded corporations are willing to provide financial support to approaches that can provide them with a more diverse workforce and more gender-equitable working practices. Increasingly, large corporate players recognise that a more gender-equitable macroeconomic policy framework is an important prerequisite to developing the optimal workplace of the future. Many women's groups are wary that taking support from private companies may jeopardise their vision of independent action and that they may be co-opted. However, with advanced states aiming to function more and more like managerial corporations, this danger can as easily occur in the public sector as in the private. Suitable commercial entities need to be identified and targeted for collaboration as they can be invaluable supporters in lobbying a government that puts so much emphasis on employment within its modernisation agenda.

The WBG is already taking advantage of opportunities to engage in popular and media debates, including at the European level, on furthering the gender budgeting agenda. The recently constructed WBG website ([www.wbg.org.uk/](http://www.wbg.org.uk/)) presents one opportunity to play a more public role in emerging debates. The website is also a low-cost activity both in terms of members' time and communication costs.

Diversity and complexity are not areas that it has embraced fully in the past, despite a well-developed gender-class nexus. However, by building on its competence on women and poverty, the WBG is well placed to strategise with organisations working for economic empowerment on behalf of women whose gender identity intersects with those of race, ethnicity and culture. Like all other feminist vehicles for empowering women, gender budgeting will need a movement if it is to reap the successes it has the potential to claim.

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