

Lessons and Challenges in Implementing Gender-Responsive Budgeting at the Local Level in Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) has emerged as a crucial policy instrument for promoting gender equity in public financial management. In Mongolia, despite relatively strong gender equality indicators, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and continue to face structural barriers to accessing public services and economic opportunities. This article examines the lessons learned and challenges encountered in the local-level implementation of GRB in Mongolia from 2020 to 2023. Drawing on a pilot initiative supported by the MERIT project and implemented in four provinces – Dundgobi, Dornod, Sukhbaatar, and Tuv – the study analyzes the impact of capacity-building efforts, micro-projects, and intergovernmental collaboration on integrating gender perspectives into local governance and budgeting. Using qualitative analysis of training data, project implementation reports, and stakeholder reflections, the study identifies key enablers of GRB, such as gender-disaggregated data usage, institutional commitment, and civil servant engagement. However, it also highlights persistent challenges including limited analytical capacity, inadequate data systems, and policy fragmentation. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on public sector reform and gender mainstreaming by offering practical insights for scaling up GRB in decentralized governance contexts. The article concludes with policy recommendations to ensure the sustainability and institutionalization of GRB in Mongolia and similar transitioning economies.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of gender equality principles into public budgeting processes has gained increasing global attention as governments seek more inclusive and equitable development outcomes. Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB), which involves incorporating gender perspectives into budget planning, allocation, and monitoring, has proven to be a vital tool for addressing structural inequalities and enhancing public sector accountability (Bosnic, 2015; Sharp, 2003). In Mongolia, GRB was formally introduced

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through a set of legislative and institutional reforms, including the Law on Promoting Gender Equality (2011), the National Program on Gender Equality (2013), and recommendations from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Ministry of Finance (MoF), with support from international organizations, initiated pilot projects in selected sectors to promote the adoption of GRB (Ministry of Finance, 2024).

Despite Mongolia's high literacy rates among women and favorable scores on the Gender Inequality Index, persistent gender disparities remain. Women's representation in senior decision-making positions is limited, and social norms continue to constrain their access to economic resources and political participation (World Bank, 2022; Government of Mongolia, 2023). These disparities underscore the need for targeted interventions that address systemic bias within governance and budgetary institutions.

From 2020 to 2023, the Mongolia: Enhancing Resource Management through Institutional Transformation (MERIT) project, funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by Catalyze+, piloted GRB at the local level in four provinces. Before implementing these pilots, the project adapted and contextualized the Canadian Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) framework to Mongolia's local context, enabling the development of gender-responsive budgeting micro-projects led by local civil servants. These pilots aimed to test the feasibility of incorporating gender analysis into local budgeting practices, improve service delivery equity, and build institutional capacity.

This article explores the key lessons learned from the GRB pilots, the barriers encountered, and the institutional factors that influenced outcomes. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1. What capacities and practices enabled successful GRB implementation at the local level?
2. What challenges hindered sustainability and scale-up?
3. How can policy and institutional frameworks be strengthened to support gender-sensitive budgeting in decentralized governance contexts?

In addressing these questions, the article contributes to the growing literature on GRB implementation in developing and transitioning countries. It also provides actionable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and public administrators seeking to institutionalize gender equality in public financial management systems.

Literature Review

The concept of GRB emerged in the 1980s as a response to the recognition that national and local budgets are not neutral instruments but reflect existing power structures and societal inequalities (Sharp, 2003). GRB involves the systematic integration of gender perspectives into all stages of the budget cycle—planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation—to promote more equitable outcomes for women, men, and gender-diverse populations (Bosnic, 2015; Stotsky, 2016). Initially pioneered in countries such as Australia and South Africa, GRB has since been adopted by more than 90 countries (Sharp, 2003), supported by multilateral institutions including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The academic and policy literature on GRB has emphasized both its transformative potential and the practical challenges associated with implementation. At the conceptual level, GRB is situated at the intersection of public financial management, gender analysis, and participatory governance (Council of Europe, 2005; UNIFEM, 2003). Scholars highlight the importance of political will, institutional capacity,

and civil society engagement as critical success factors for effective GRB (Schneider, 2006; Lahousen & Vandangombo, 2020). Moreover, the integration of gender-disaggregated data, performance budgeting systems, and gender-sensitive indicators are widely recognized as technical enablers of GRB (Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability, 2020; OECD, 2013).

Despite global momentum, evidence from developing and transitioning countries shows that GRB initiatives often encounter significant constraints. These include fragmented policy frameworks, weak inter-sectoral coordination, limited human and financial resources, and insufficient analytical capacity among public servants (Stotsky, 2016; Jamiyandagva, 2021). Furthermore, institutional resistance and deeply entrenched gender norms can hinder sustained adoption, particularly at subnational levels where capacity gaps are more pronounced (Filion & Langan, 2021; Vladislavljjevic, 2021).

In Mongolia, GRB has evolved within the broader governance reform agenda. Initial efforts were concentrated at the national level, supported by the World Bank and UN agencies. However, until recently, local-level implementation remained limited due to inadequate training, a lack of contextualized tools, and insufficient alignment between national gender policies and local governance practices (Erdenechimeg & Enkhtuvshin, 2004; Gender Associations International Consulting GmbH, 2020). The MERIT project represents one of the first comprehensive attempts to pilot GRB in local governments using a combination of training, coaching, and results-oriented micro-projects.

This article contributes to the GRB literature by offering a detailed case study of Mongolia's provincial experience, examining the role of institutional actors, training methodologies, and localized adaptation in advancing gender-sensitive budgeting.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze the implementation of GRB at the local level in Mongolia. The research focuses on the MERIT project's pilot activities conducted between 2020 and 2023 in four provinces: Dundgobi, Dornod, Sukhbaatar, and Tuv. The project aimed to test the feasibility and impact of locally-implemented GRB micro-projects, supported by training, coaching, mentoring, and intergovernmental collaboration.

Data Sources

Data for this study were drawn from a variety of sources to ensure a comprehensive and robust analysis. These included training participation and completion records obtained from the National Academy of Governance (NAoG); project documentation such as Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) training materials, micro-project proposals, and implementation reports from 2020 to 2023; and evaluation and policy reports produced by MERIT, the MoF, and the National Committee on Gender Equality (NCGE).

Additionally, reflections and feedback gathered from local public servants during plenary sessions and coaching activities were incorporated. All data utilized were part of the program's internal documentation or derived from publicly available reports, thereby ensuring full compliance with ethical research standards.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by a framework for evaluating gender-responsive public financial management, adapted from the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) GRPFM Supplementary Framework (PEFA, 2020). Key thematic areas include institutional capacity and training

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effectiveness, the integration of gender analysis into policy and budgeting, stakeholder engagement and coordination, and the outcomes and sustainability of micro-project implementation.

Qualitative content analysis was used to extract patterns, enablers, and constraints across provinces. Data were manually coded into thematic categories reflecting training impacts, institutional roles, data utilization, and policy alignment.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it relies primarily on project-generated documentation, which may reflect institutional biases. Second, the short time frame of the pilot projects limits the ability to assess long-term impacts or sustainability. Third, the absence of comparative data from non-participating provinces restricts broader generalizability. Nonetheless, the findings offer valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers implementing GRB in similar decentralized governance contexts.

Findings

The findings are structured around key dimensions of GRB implementation as piloted by the MERIT project: capacity building, micro-project implementation, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability planning.

Capacity Building and Training Outcomes

The cornerstone of the GRB pilot was a comprehensive capacity-building strategy that combined online modules, in-person workshops, coaching, and reinforcement training. By June 2022, a total of 1,289 public servants across the four provinces had registered for the online course “Introduction to GRB at the Unit Level” with a 66.1% course completion rate (National Academy of Governance, 2024). Notably, 76.5% of course completers were women, indicating high female engagement. In-person training workshops and coaching sessions were built on this foundation, targeting gender focal points and local administrators. Participants engaged in gender analysis exercises using tools such as the Ishikawa diagram and the Persona method, which helped contextualize gender disparities in service delivery.

Capacity building also emphasized peer learning. Online and plenary experience-sharing meetings allowed teams to reflect on micro-project implementation, share successes, and discuss challenges. As a result, many participants demonstrated increased understanding of gender inequality and reported improved integration of gender perspectives into their daily work.

Implementation of GRB Micro-Projects

A total of 95 public servants from Dundgobi, Dornod, and Tuv provinces who completed the online training with high scores were selected for in-person advanced-level training focused on the implementation of gender-responsive micro-projects (MERIT, 2024). Of these participants, 56 were women (58.9%) and 39 were men (41.1%).

A total of 35 micro-projects were developed, with 32 (91.4%) successfully implemented. Most projects addressed gender inequalities in local services such as education, employment, decision-making, and access to public programs. Importantly, 66.7% of projects in Dundgobi, 81.8% in Sukhbaatar, and 83.3% in Tuv were implemented without additional financial resources—termed “zero-budget” projects—by embedding changes into existing policies or procedures.

Project teams were composed of a diverse range of local officials: 43% from provincial agencies, 29% from provincial governor's offices, and 11% from district governor's offices. Gender-disaggregated participation also showed higher involvement of women (60%) in project implementation. One illustrative example came from a project in Dundgobi, where gender analysis revealed that 97.2% of beneficiaries of a livestock subsidy program were men, due to funds being transferred to the male "head of household." The team proposed amending the program to use joint accounts, a change accepted by provincial authorities.

Stakeholder Roles and Institutional Engagement

Stakeholders at multiple levels contributed to project success. The NAOG institutionalized GRB and GBA+ training in its public service curriculum. The NCGE provided policy oversight and facilitated coordination across government actors. Governor's offices played a leadership role in mobilizing local teams and integrating GRB into local planning and development programs.

The pilot also fostered collaboration between public servants and gender consultants. Tailored coaching services helped clarify project objectives, refine implementation plans, and troubleshoot emerging issues. This dynamic, iterative support process enhanced project quality and ownership among participants.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite high completion and success rates, the implementation of gender-responsive micro-projects faced several challenges (MERIT, 2024). Many micro-projects were found to be overly ambitious or disconnected from the day-to-day functions of the teams. A common obstacle was the lack of sex-disaggregated baseline data, limiting teams' ability to analyze and develop plans. Furthermore, competing responsibilities and limited time resources negatively affected participants' levels of commitment. Weak alignment with organizational performance plans also constrained the institutionalization of project outcomes. In some cases, leadership turnover disrupted continuity and undermined sustainability.

Beyond these factors, broader social issues—such as limited public understanding of gender-related concepts and less support from senior officials—impacted the depth and consistency of implementation across provinces.

DISCUSSION

The pilot implementation of GRB in Mongolia provides both practical insights and conceptual lessons for advancing gender equality through local governance reform.

Embedding Gender Perspectives in Public Administration

The findings underscore the feasibility of integrating gender analysis into local budgeting without requiring substantial financial resources. The success of "zero-budget" micro-projects demonstrates that meaningful change can occur through administrative and procedural reforms alone. This supports global evidence that GRB is not primarily a financial issue but a governance challenge (Sharp, 2003; Stotsky, 2016). By linking GRB to civil servants' existing roles and responsibilities, the MERIT project enhanced ownership and sustainability, a lesson applicable to other decentralized governance settings.

Capacity Development as a Catalyst

The tiered training model—starting with foundational online courses, followed by practical workshops, coaching, and peer learning—proved critical in building both technical knowledge and

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behavioral change. Participants' ability to apply gender analysis in concrete programmatic contexts demonstrates the effectiveness of combining didactic and experiential learning. The integration of training into the National Academy of Governance curriculum ensures institutional continuity, addressing one of the major barriers to long-term GRB adoption in many countries (Bosnic, 2015).

Institutional and Intergovernmental Coordination

The multi-stakeholder approach—linking national policy institutions (NCGE, MoF), local governments, and training bodies—was essential for scaling and coherence. However, challenges such as poor alignment with organizational plans, insufficient data infrastructure, and limited policy continuity highlight the need for more systemic integration of GRB into public financial management frameworks. The development of standardized indicators and inclusion of GRB metrics in performance-based budgeting systems could address these gaps (National Committee on Gender Equality & Mongolian Marketing Consulting Group, 2021).

Cultural and Political Dimensions

The case also reveals the cultural dimensions of GRB. For instance, redefining household benefit allocation structures required confronting traditional gender norms. GRB, therefore, extends beyond technical capacity to political and normative change. Sustained political commitment and advocacy are necessary to mainstream GRB principles across public institutions and civil society.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the implementation of Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) at the local level in Mongolia through the MERIT pilot project (2020–2023). Despite Mongolia's relatively strong gender indicators at the national level, persistent structural and institutional barriers continue to constrain women's access to public services and leadership roles. The pilot demonstrated that integrating gender perspectives into local budgeting is both feasible and impactful, particularly when supported by a structured capacity-building program and multi-level institutional engagement.

The findings show that well-designed training programs, contextualized analytical tools, and locally-driven micro-projects can significantly enhance public servants' understanding of gender issues and their ability to incorporate GRB into planning and budgeting processes. Importantly, the success of many “zero-budget” initiatives underscores that gender-sensitive reforms need not require additional funding, but rather a realignment of institutional priorities, procedures, and performance expectations.

At the same time, challenges such as limited data infrastructure, workload pressures, inconsistent leadership support, and policy discontinuity highlight the fragility of such reforms if not fully institutionalized. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on GRB by providing a grounded case of subnational implementation in a transitioning country. It reinforces the importance of combining technical training with adaptive, participatory, and policy-aligned approaches.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies primarily on project-generated documentation and qualitative data, which may introduce reporting bias or lack external validation. Second,

the time frame of the pilot (approximately 12–18 months per province) limits the ability to assess long-term behavioral and institutional change. Third, while the study offers rich insights into four provinces, it does not provide a comparative analysis with non-participating provinces or sectors, limiting generalizability. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies, quantitative impact evaluations, and cross-regional comparisons to deepen understanding of GRB's effectiveness in decentralized governance contexts.

Policy Recommendations

To sustain and scale up GRB implementation in Mongolia and comparable governance contexts, the following policy actions are recommended (Filion & Langan, 2021; MERIT, 2024):

1. **Institutionalize GRB in Budgetary and Governance Frameworks** Embed GRB principles into national and subnational budget laws, performance-based budgeting systems, and public financial management guidelines. Ensure that gender-sensitive indicators are part of program monitoring and evaluation systems.
2. **Strengthen Data Systems for Gender Analysis** Invest in the systematic collection and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data across sectors. Develop technical guidance and templates for local governments to conduct gender impact assessments as part of routine planning processes.
3. **Build Sustainable Training and Coaching Mechanisms** Integrate GRB and GBA+ modules into the continuous professional development programs of the National Academy of Governance and local training centers. Establish certified training-of-trainers programs and maintain regular refresher courses for civil servants.
4. **Enhance Inter-Sectoral and Vertical Coordination** Develop formal coordination mechanisms between the Ministry of Finance, NCGE, sectoral ministries, and local governments to align strategies, share data, and harmonize implementation. Use cross-sectoral working groups to monitor GRB progress.
5. **Foster Political Commitment and Public Awareness** Conduct targeted advocacy campaigns to increase awareness of GRB among elected officials, senior managers, and civil society. Promote success stories, such as the micro-projects in Dornod, Dundgobi, Sukhbaatar, and Tuv, to demonstrate the tangible impact of gender-responsive budgeting.
6. **Promote Scalability through Replication and Policy Integration** Encourage replication of successful micro-projects in other provinces and integrate them into provincial and sectoral development strategies. Consider including GRB requirements in funding criteria for local governments to incentivize adoption.

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