

Chidambaram's Budget 2013 likely to bring good news for women

This year's budget is likely to be a boon for women. As part of the UPA government's strategy to woo women voters in the run-up to the 2014 general elections, Union finance minister P. Chidambaram is expected to present a "gender budget".

Sources said the budget, to be presented on February 28, will incorporate a special package for women that will include higher tax exemption limit vis-a-vis men and provisions for easy loans to set up business ventures.

The package will also include a special skill development scheme for young widows and the destitute as well as a hike in allocation for other women's welfare schemes.

It is reliably learnt that the "gender strategy" has been formulated following the unprecedented unity that was witnessed among women during the prolonged nationwide protests against the South Delhi gang rape incident. The political leadership apparently sees a potential vote-bank in this "fellow feeling".

The 2012-13 budget introduced by then finance minister Pranab Mukherjee had raised the income-tax exemption limit for all tax payers to Rs 2 lakh. But it had resulted in women paying the same amount of tax as their male counterparts with equivalent salaries.

Sources said the new budget is expected to increase the exemption limit for all tax payers from the current level of Rs 2 lakh, but the exemption for women will be higher than that for men in order to restore the gender advantage that they had got accustomed to in earlier years (2010-11).

The Yashwant Sinha-headed parliamentary standing committee on finance has recommended that the exemption limit on income tax be raised to Rs 3 lakh. However, with Chidambaram under pressure to curtail the runaway fiscal deficit, the exact amount by which the exemption limit will be raised is still not clear.

Sources disclosed that the finance ministry has worked out various combinations and permutations for the exemption limit and the impact it will have on the fiscal deficit.

The budget is also expected to announce schemes for extending special loans to women to run their own business enterprises. This scheme is expected to cover the poor as well.

The finance minister is also likely to announce a 100 per cent increase in allocation of funds for the safety of women from Rs 150 crore to Rs 300 crore.

The money will be used to set up special centres and helplines for women in distress. These centres will enable assault victims to get medical and legal help and also provide monetary aid to the destitute.

Sources said that while the finance minister has been cutting down on allocation to various ministries, he is expected to enhance the allocation to the ministry of women and child development by 12 per cent to Rs 20,000 crore. This is likely to be among the highest allocation in a year when most ministries are expected to get an increase of only 6 per cent or less.

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